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Where Was the Outrage? The Lack of Public Concern for the Increasing Sensationalism in Marvel Comics in a Conservative Era 1978-1993

Robert Joshua Howard
Western Kentucky University, robert.howard245@topper.wku.edu

WHERE WAS THE OUTRAGE? THE LACK OF PUBLIC CONCERN FOR THE INCREASING SENSATIONALISM IN MARVEL COMICS IN A CONSERVATIVE ERA 1978-1993

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Date Recommended 8/1/14

Anthony Harkins, Director of Thesis

Carol Crowe Carraco

Jack Thacker

Carl Fox 8-12-14

Carl Fox, Dean, Graduate School Date

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Marissa Lynn Howard, who has always been extremely supportive of my pursuits. A wife who chooses to spend our honeymoon fund on a trip to Wyoming, to sit in a stuffy library reading fan mail, all while entertaining two dogs is special indeed.

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Robert Joshua Howard August 2014 159 Pages

Directed by: Anthony Harkins, Carol Crowe Carraco, and Jack Thacker

Department of History Western Kentucky University

This thesis explains the connection between comics and public reactions in two separate eras of conservatism. Comic books were targeted by critics in the 1950s because their content challenged conservative norms. In 1954, a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing on Juvenile Delinquency tried to determine if comic books were having a harmful impact on children. The senators were concerned that comic books objectified women, taught children to engage in violence, promoted bigotry, and perhaps even encouraged homosexuality. The concerns caused outrage that was encouraged by the press. As a result, comic books adopted a form of self-censorship through the Comic Code Authority. The censorship combined with challenges from other media collapsed the comic book market until the next decade.

Between 1978 through 1993, the United States entered a second period of conservatism. During this period, comic books reflected far more sensational content than that which had caused the public to react so strongly in 1954. And yet this time, there was almost no public outrage directed at comics. The purpose of this study is to find out why sensational content did not result in the same degree of public outrage that had occurred in 1954. This thesis starts with an overview of the controversies about comics in the 1950s era. Then, in the remainder of the thesis, comic books produced between 1978 and 1993 by the most popular mainstream comic book company, Marvel Comics, focusing on *Daredevil*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Ghost*

Rider, and the *X-Men*. The thesis also draws extensively on fan mail from the Stan Lee Archives in Laramie, Wyoming, and in the comic books themselves. Comparing comic books and the period's changing media landscape, I show that comic books were deemed subversive and a source of scandalously sensational material out of step with much popular culture in the 1950s, but blended so well into the media landscape of the 1970s and 80s that they were safe from public outrage. Therefore, even though comic books became more violent and engaged in escalating levels of sexual objectification of female characters, fans approved of the new tone.

Introduction

Comic books trace their origin to the comic strips found in newspapers in the early 20th century. Max Gaines and Harry Wildenberg, both of whom are credited with producing the first real comic books and being instrumental in the creation of some of the first superheroes, discovered in 1933 that by manipulating the plates used for the Sunday comics, they could create a cheap magazine which they could fill with archived comic strips thereby giving comic books their standard size.[1] The comic books created by Gaines and Wildenberg were supposed to be a short-lived advertising gimmick, but they became a sensation. The cheap price and small shelf space made them a hit with both consumers and distributers. Further, since the funny pages had already been published by newspapers, there was no perceived need for oversight.

The medium continued to mature in the 1940s. As comic books became more established, publishers produced original, less censored content. However, the lack of censorship led to problems. Since they came from comic strips, it was easy for critics, who saw comic strips as a form of low culture, to apply the same criticism to comic books. These critics derided the comic book and argued their sole purpose was to entertain the masses rather than elevating its status. Comic books survived these early skirmishes, however, due in large part to World War II.

During World War II, comic books promoted American patriotism by serving as propaganda for the war effort. The government immediately saw the potential of comic books. For example, the Office of War Information (OWI) created a media division devoted to creating cartoons and comic books that allowed it to carry its message directly

[1] Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3.

to the people through comic books. The OWI was only one of several government entities that saw the propagandistic potential of comic books. Before the end of World War II, the Department of Treasury, the Federal Security Agency, and the military had all produced comic books.[2] Thus, the U.S. government in large part helped to legitimize comic books during World War II.[3] The Second World War was also an enormous opportunity for public comic book companies as well.

Several comic book artists and writers got their start in the Army. In keeping with the war effort, mainstream comic book companies produced content dripping with nationalism. For instance, the first edition of *Captain America*, produced by what is now known as Marvel Comics, shows the title character belting Adolf Hitler across the room. This may explain the incredible popularity comic books enjoyed at home and abroad. For example in 1942, 15 million comic books were sold each month, and by 1943, sales had climbed to 25 million copies.[4] But these sales figures did not last long. Returning GIs weary of war resented patriotic content forced upon them, and many GIs did not embrace comic books when they returned to the United States at the end of the war.

The market for comic books was saturated since veterans no longer seemed interested in buying comic books. For example, *Captain Marvel Adventures* only sold at half the rate in 1949 that it did during the war.[5] At the same time, many comic book artists and writers were now unemployed. As a result, the comic book industry had a

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[2] Richard Graham, *Government Issue: Comics for the People*, 1940s-2000s (New York: Abrams Comicarts, 2011), 16.
[3] It should be noted that the Army's test of core knowledge focused on mathematical reasoning before the end of World War II; however, afterward troops were given tests that included only a measurement of their literacy. Thus, comic books served an important function in the World War II era since many of the troops were most likely less proficient at reading than post-World War II Americans would be; Thomas G. Sticht and William B. Armstrong, *Adult Literacy in the United States: A Compendium of Quantitative Data and Interpretive Comment*s. National Inst. for Literacy, Washington, DC. 1994, 38.
[4] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 11.
[5] Ibid., 52.

plethora of artists available.[6] In response to the extreme market pressures, some in the industry turned to sensationalism to entice readers. As a result, the stories in comic books became more violent, implied more sexuality, and effectively pushed the envelope of acceptability. For example, women were featured now with less clothing and more curves. Artists increasingly presented women in what Dr. Fredric Wertham, a prominent social psychologist of the time, has called the "pre-rape position" (by which he meant women on the ground typically with a torn dress with a man standing above them reaching toward them).[7] All manner of bodily mutilation was depicted, including but not limited to people being stabbed in the eye and decapitated heads. Though the military market had dried up, the new more violent, more sexual content attracted a new market, America's youth.

In the late 1940s, a youth culture began to take shape in the United States. The newest generation was raised in a country at the height of its economic and military power. From 1945 until the end of 1949, the United States was the only nuclear power in the world. At the same time, the U.S. had survived the war with its infrastructure intact. Therefore, the U.S. enjoyed a period of unsurpassed economic prosperity while it helped its allies rebuild. During the period, the United States and Russia began to view one another with increasing suspicion. This distrust turned into outright hostility in August, 1949, when the Soviet Union tested its first successful nuclear weapon. As a result, America's new youth culture was told by the older generations that they were living the good life. Yet for many youth, it seemed that the United States had embraced a self-

[6] The market saturation may have promoted sensational artwork by rewarding those who could attract an audience through more salacious artwork.
[7] Fredrick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 1953. (Reprint, Laurel: Main Road Books, 2004), 8.

defeating policy in regard to Russia. Indeed, many young people raised at a time of prosperity were less inclined to place their faith in authority figures, including their parents. It seems fitting then that part of their rebellion against authority was acted out economically and they sought out entertainment without parental oversight. One of the first mediums this new youth culture embraced was the comic book, the only uncensored fare available at that time. Other censored content on television, radio, and music did not have the same appeal to youth, hungry for novelty and realism that was readily available in comic books.

As comic books became darker, depicting a gritty realism that appealed to young people, cultural watchdogs took note. One of the leading crusaders against the comic book industry was Dr. Fredrick Wertham, who often compared the comic book industry to Hitler. He argued that the comic book industry was turning children into Nazis who were who were easily controlled, ruthless, and cruel. At the same time, new data seemed to show America's youth were also becoming more violent, more sexual, and—in general—more critical of the older generation.[8] For these Americans, the one-two punch of Wertham's criticism of comics and new data offered an explanation for and "proof" of a rise in juvenile delinquency. As a result, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency held hearings between April and June of 1954 focused entirely on the comic book industry. According to Amy Nyberg, a social historian, the committee intended from the start to force the comic book industry "to police itself."[9] Many comic book publishers attempted to present themselves in a positive light at the hearing, taking

[8] James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 63.
[9] Amy Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), Kindle Edition, 1123.

a more humble stance. However, William Gaines (a comic book publisher) who had just recently inherited EC comics, ridiculed Wertham publicly. Gaines had also recently published "Are You a Communist Dupe?" a satire of the McCarthy hearings. His very confrontational attitude toward the committee played out poorly with the American public. The *New York Times* blasted Gaines the next morning with the article, "No Harm in Horror, Comic Issuer Says," which focused on the heated exchange between Gaines and the committee over one of his comics, that featured a severed head.[10] As a result of this hearing, in which Wertham was a star witness, the Comic Code Authority (CCA) was created, which imposed rigorous standards on the comic book industry.

The CCA was the result of a half century of media criticism that had been directed at the media. It interwove all the collective criticism of earlier media including music and film. As a result, the rules established for comic books and film were very similar. For example, the popular criticism against comic books starting in the late 1940s leading up to the creation of the CCA had focused primarily on sexual deviancy and violence. A quick comparison of the CCA to the Hays Code for motion pictures reveals archaic arguments over culture. For example, the Comic Code stated, "Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and, wherever possible, good grammar shall be employed." Further, the Comic Code emphasized the "responsibility" of the "comic-book medium" to American culture.[11] Similarly, the Hays Code argued that "the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for

[10] Philip Quarles, "Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency: Wertham Versus Gaines On Decency Standards," available at http://www.wnyc.org/story/215975-senate-subcommittee-juvenile-delinquency-ii/
[11] "Good Shall Triumph Over Evil: The Comic Book Code of 1954," http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6543/.

much correct thinking."[12] The vision of each set of guidelines was that media was expected to uplift the audience, to educate them, in short to provide a service for the audience, not just act as a form of entertainment. Whatever the cultural critics argued, however, there was a rather large audience who craved such "low culture." Clearly in the early 1950s, the comic book industry was a major media outlet because it avoided such censorship but much of its audience was driven to other media by the CCA.

The rules imposed by the CCA, along with the negative press resulting from coverage of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency and Wertham, almost destroyed the comic book industry. The CCA became extremely powerful in a short period of time. Originally, the comic book industry intended the CCA to have little to no control over the day-to-day operations of the business. Nonetheless, the CCA became incredibly powerful because the negative press resulting from the Senate hearings worried distributors. Since the direct market for comic books did not exist yet, comic books were forced to abide by the decision of distributors concerned with a larger backlash that could further erode business. As a result, distributors insisted that comic books carry the CCA "Seal of Approval" or they would not be distributed. Additionally, other media, specifically television, had become a major contender for the public's attention. All these factors worked to undermine the comic book market. Those who remained in the business were forced to produce material containing blasé plotlines that reinforced white middle class norms. Thus, within a year of the creation of the CCA, many in the comic book industry had failed, leaving only a handful of companies controlling the market.[13] For example, in the two years following the hearing, eighteen

[12] "Complete Nudity is Never Permitted": The Motion Picture Code of 1930 http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5099/.
[13] According to R.C. Harvey of *The Comics Journal*, "The day-to-day enforcement of the Code was performed by the

publishers ceased publications, and annual production fell from 650 titles to barely 300.[14] The superhero and western became the dominant type of comic book. Of the few companies to survive the comics purge, DC emerged as the industry leader, followed closely by Marvel. Although the industry had suffered a serious setback in the 1950s, there was still an audience hungry for more realism. Marvel Comics would be the first to capitalize on that demand.

Comics Code Authority, a panel of reviewers that operated under the direction of a full-time paid administrator. Comic books that passed the review carried the CMAA Seal of Approval on their covers. The Comics Code soon drove out of the industry several comic book publishers whose product could not pass the review and still retain its essential appeal." R.C. Harvey, "John Goldwater, the Comics Code Authority, and Archie," *The Comics Journal*, July 28, 2011.

[14] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 179.

Chapter 1: Comic Books a Source of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States?: 1930-1954

The rise of the comic book fad in the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s was cut short because comic books fell prey to an anti-comic-book hysteria. This panic was due in large part to the Cold War which created an American society obsessed with conformity. In this context, the American people expected that mass media would act as a tool to reinforce white middle-class norms. The most important norms focused on gender, specifically emphasizing separate spheres for men and women and normalizing sexual relations through marriage. At the same time, it was expected that those of Western European ancestry would be shown as the apex of the racial hierarchy. Race when discussed would depict white-skinned people as superior to others. Most media acquiesced or had previously been beaten into submission. As such, the media presented fare that was censored, either by government mandate or through a form of self-censorship. Movies were beholden to the Hays Code (1930); the FCC had regulated radio since 1934 and began regulating television in the 1950s. At the same time, editors acted as censors for the content of their newspapers. During this period it was nearly impossible to find a medium attacking conformity. In fact, one of the only major sources of criticism of America society came from comic books.

Children of the Bomb

Since Cold War ideology envisioned a strong possibility of war (potentially nuclear) with the Soviet Union and because children were considered part of the Cold War fight as perspective combatants, inventors, scientists, or teachers, even children and teenagers had a prescribed place in U.S. society. Both young males and females were

enlisted in the crusade against communism. For example, young girls were told for the first time that not only could they be highly educated, but that the fate of their country rested on them acquiring education.[15] At the same time, young men were encouraged to play with toy guns, items linked to America's romanticized Western past. During the Cold War 160,000,000 toy pistols and holsters were sold. The total sales of toy guns from 1950 to the end of the decade accounted for over $100,000,000 more than any other toy. As with comic books, "Parents and experts struggled to make sense of the craze." Unlike comic books, toy guns were ultimately found to be nonthreatening.[16] Some critics took the toy gun craze a step further, associating the use of guns early in childhood with an ingrained ability to use the real thing in later years against the communists. In other words children were not playing, they were training, and this activity met with wide public approval. Although both comic books and toy guns might have caused parental concern because of their association with violence, toy guns never caused the fear that comic books did. This indicates it was not merely the violence in comic books that critics found distressing, but also the condemnation of Cold War ideology. The children of the nuclear age were more pessimistic of the government's Cold War posturing. This was because, unlike their parents, children of the post-war era chose comic books as their main media source. Children were well informed about devastation that could be caused by nuclear war. The battle over comic books was the first battle between the younger generation and their parents over media content with a specific Cold War emphasis.[17]

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[15] Karal Marling, *As Seen on TV*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 22.
[16] Angela Keaton, "Backyard Desperadoes: American Attitudes Concerning Toy Guns in the Early Cold War Era," *The Journal of American Culture* 33 (2010): 183-185.
[17] Bradford Wright reports in *Comic Book Nation* that half the population in the United States read comic books. According to his source over 90% of boys and girls from six to eleven read comic books. The readership drops to just over 40% for men and 30% of women between 18 and 30 read comic books. Only 1 in 10 adult over the age of 30 read comic books. As such, a clear generation gap is present in comic book readership.

Children of this period were expected to be patriotic and militarily focused. Their play focused on military conquests, while the threat of nuclear war was constantly reinforced by the U.S. educational system. For example, "educators, government officials, and parents realized the necessity, even the urgency, of preparing the county's youth for a new, more precarious world."[18] According to Bo Jacobs, a professor for International Studies at Hiroshima University and an expert on the culture of nuclear weapons and warfare, "The children of the Atomic Age wondered if they might be the last children on Earth." The overwhelming fear of the period pervaded youth culture. Students were taught to "duck and cover" in case of Atomic attack, but as Jacobs points out, "most youngsters knew that this scenario was not what they could really expect. Science-fiction books, magazines, and films—with their core audience of teenage boys—had been filled with tales of nuclear devastation since the late 1940s."[19] For youngsters then, experts and authority figures came to symbolize an inept system. Children began to realize they could not count on adults for their survival. In this context, their reading material became a source of knowledge for the coming threat. Science fiction became a way for children to understand the overwhelming power of nuclear proliferation. These same children grew to become teenagers at a time comic books were drawing on science fiction's cultural critiques. For example, nuclear war was covered in many comic books. According to Ferenc Szas, a historian of the early atomic age,

> From the fall of 1945 to about 1960, the comic book industry treated the onset of the atomic age in three distinct phases. First, the various "educational" comics tried to simplify nuclear history for their readers, along with stern advice to young people on how they should utilize this newfound power. Second, artists hastily cobbled together a cadre of "atomic superheroes," none of whom survived for

[18] Bo Jacobs, "Atomic Kids: Duck and Cover and Atomic Alert Teach American Children How to Survive Atomic Attack," *Film and History* 40 (2010): 32.
[19] Ibid., 34.

> very long. Finally, writers engaged their established costumed superheroes in confrontations with a variety of atomic threats, after which the hero often didactically warned readers of the potential dangers of the fissioned atom.[20]

Comic books offered children a realistic view of nuclear warfare that coincided with their own pessimistic view of the Cold War. By reading comic books cynical to the goals of the Cold War, children were empowering themselves with arguments against the authority of the United States. Thus the great draw for many readers of comic books that discussed nuclear issues was the potential pitfalls and dangers of nuclear weaponry. As a result, many children were taught to respect and fear nuclear weaponry. At the same time, they understood, without integrating prevailing political theories about communism and thus perhaps more clearly than adults, what the ramifications of nuclear war would be.[21] The baby boomers who had grown up with the threat of nuclear annihilation, were being taught to distrust authority, and simultaneously, (perhaps understandably)-showed their pessimism and fear through rebellion. The comic book industry challenged Cold War ideology, thereby effectively aligning itself with the younger more pessimistic section of U.S. society. This led to a direct confrontation with an older section of the population that placed its faith in authority. While comic books presented a dark and foreboding future, the mainstream media presented tame content meant to calm fears about a possible nuclear war by avoiding the subject and focusing on reinforcing cultural norms.

Media Malfeasance: The Government's Control of the Media

The youth of the 1950s had come of age during a period in which other media had

[20] Ferenc Szana, *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear World* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2012), 47.
[21] This is only three years before Ford unveiled the concept car, the *Nucleon,* a nuclear-powered car, which any comic book reader could have told them was a bad idea.

already been co-opted by the authority of the U.S. government and/or given in to self-regulation. Radio and television were both initially seen as media which had extensive educational benefits, while comic books and their predecessors the comic strip had been derided by people like Wertham because they lacked educational benefit.[22] Many cultural critics argued that comic books that had the potential for educational use were drowned out by "crime" comics. In the 1950s, radio was an accepted medium because the public saw immense possibilities for educational use.[23] Yet, it too had once faced cultural watchdogs that had made similar arguments against radio that were now being used against comic books. For example, some radio programs contained characters that took aim at gender and racial roles. The character played by Jack Benny on the radio evoked the ire of some because, "His traits of helplessness and dependency, as well as his failure to develop romantic relationships, could evoke sympathy among listeners who had a sense of powerlessness; but these traits also played off cultural anxieties about gender and alternative sexuality."[24] In this case the programmers of NBC took issue with Benny's character and urged that Benny ban "anything of the lavender nature." In other words, any male character that might be construed as homosexual or feminine was off limits.[25] This is just one example of the criticism a public medium might face. As such, many broadcast companies in 1933 began conforming to the expectations of moralists. Thus the industry had voluntarily engaged in self-censorship. NBC, for example, "produced a booklet in 1938 that maintained that 'good taste and good radio are forged indelibly

[22] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 10.
[23] Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 310.
[24] Leroy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2006), 256.
[25] Ashby, 257

together...The American people are not interested in radio programs dealing with sex or sex perversion.'"[26] Television would follow the methods and standards already established by radio. Therefore, both television and radio had both been exposed to the same criticism as comic books, however, radio had been quick to reassure the American public and television quickly adopted the standard already set by radio. Both radio and television saw self-censorship in their own best economic interests.

Despite censorship pressures, all media benefited from the massive post-War economy with the new prominence given to consumer spending. In post-World War II United States culture, consumerism became a major source of patriotism. As such, when new technology that had been restrained by the war effort finally emerged, it was embraced fully by the American public. This was a part of the reason for the rapid acceptance of television by the American public. For instance, "In 1947, it was pointed out, the number of TV sets operating in America had increased by more than 2,000 percent, from 8,000 to 170,000."[27] One would expect that given the massive influx of television and television programing, television would be subject to moralist and cultural watchdogs as comic books had been. In fact, this appears to have been the case. Television had been put on notice in 1947 when giveaway shows had been "purged" from the airways by the FCC on the basis that they were nothing more than unlicensed lotteries and therefore too low brow to be on the air.[28] Further, some critics had attempted to link "Juvenile Delinquency" with the sex and violence on television. Yet none of the claims against radio or television had ever caught the public's attention to the same degree as

[26] Ashby, 253.
[27] Harry Castleman and Walter Podrazik, *Watching TV: Six Decades of American Television* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 30.
[28] Ibid., 45.

those made about comic books.

The real reason that radio and television escaped moral outrage during the Cold War was because of the major changes which occurred at the FCC during the early 1950s, which effectively made both television and radio tools of America's Cold War offensive. Under the Eisenhower administration, several FCC positions had been filled by McCarthyites. Some of these men, such as John C. Doefer, set about controlling licenses and pushing an anticommunist message. Others appointed to the FCC were even more practiced in the art of public manipulation including a member of McCarthy's inner circle and former FBI agent, Robert E. Lee. Lee was "said to have provided information on which McCarthy based his charges of subversives in the State Department."[29] As a result of his knowledge of subterfuge, the FCC was extremely effective at controlling both television and radio, promoting issues that the ultra-right found important by screening applicants for licenses. As such, the airwaves came under extreme right government control. Therefore, few media outlets existed that did not in some way reinforce the social norms of the period as handed down by the government.

Comic books were popular because they did not necessarily give the fairy-tale ending found in other media, such as film, sanctioned by forced self-regulation. In the early 1950s comic books were an entity unto themselves outside of government regulation. Their autonomy allowed them to push the boundaries of acceptability, but it was the changes in the readership that forced comics toward scandalous content. In the post-World War period, the comic book industry was forced to diversify their characters

[29] Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), Kindle Edition, 1846-52.

and plot lines.[30] By bending to economic pressures, comic books entered a period of unsurpassed artwork, plots, and creativity while simultaneously pushing the boundary of acceptability, good taste and decorum. This was the apex of the comic book, the so-called "Golden Age." In the years between 1948 to 1954, they would find unsurpassed circulation and success. At the end of 1954, however, the Comic Code Authority (CCA) would effectively homogenize plot lines and create an era of blasé artwork curtailing any criticism of the United States and presenting media that was much more in line with their brethren in the funny pages of the newspaper. The CCA forced comic books to adopt this style because it was in line with the adult population's expectation of media. Coupled with an aging audience who found entertainment elsewhere, this effectively ended one of the most prolific periods of comic book creation.[31] The criticism in comic books of Cold War society, combined with the tenuous argument that violent comic books were leading to an out-of-control youth culture resulted in the vocal criticism of comic books.

Cold War Collectivism

The comic book industry mocked America's anti-communist Cold War culture, including its overly restrictive gender norms, and took issue with America's foreign policies. According to Kyle Cuordileone, an historian of gender history in the United States, "Whatever else anti-Communism most certainly was, once unleashed in the culture it served to redefine America against the wave of social change, operating in some cases as an ideological buffer against discomforting developments and perceived social ills."[32] In other words, during the early years of the Cold War, many in the United States

[30] Wright, *Comic Book Nation,* 57.
[31] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* location 66-68.
[32] Kyle Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 341.

were paranoid of a Communist conspiracy. These were the years in the United States in which deviation from conformity was dangerous. This happened to be the same period that comic books acted as form of uncensored media that provoked hard questions about American society.

Newspapers and magazines reported numbers that often inflated the actual scale of the comic book craze and deepened parental mistrust of the medium by making it seem more wide-reaching than it was. Even reliable sources such as a study by the University of California Berkley stated a mind boggling one billion comics a year were sold at the peak of the comic craze.[33] It is clear that the period from the end of the Second World War until late 1955 was one of unsurpassed interest in comic books. However, this seemingly inexplicable interest created a backlash by parents, who were questioning the youth culture with values and interests so distinctly different from their own.

Their neurosis focused in part on communism and found a strong connection between fighting communism and reinforcing tightly restrictive gender roles that offered safety and security for many. As a result, any deviation seemed to be an argument against that standard which was then conflated into a larger aberration. For instance, in the early 1950s social critics argued that there was a strong parallel between communism and "sex perversion," including homosexuality. At the same time, parents were concerned with seemingly wild and rebellious youth, who many concluded were out of control—due in large part to a lack of parental oversight.[34] The obvious critique was that if mothers

[33] "Billion Comic Book Sale Yearly Shown in Report: Survey Made for State Legislature Reveals Adults, Including Teachers, Read them Too," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1955, 5.

[34] Cold War ideology argued that those who were weak could be corrupted. Children whose parents could not control them were therefore subjecting their child to outside influence, perhaps even communism. For example, in *Rebel without a Cause* James Dean's character, Jim Stark, is nearly undone by his father's weak feminine ways. It is only through the efforts of the masculine authority of the government brought to bear upon him by the police chief that Jim is able to embrace the good life complete with gender norms.

stayed at home and out of the work place, their children and teenagers would have more parental oversight and would be better behaved. This view ignored the reality faced by teenagers during the Cold War.

Getting Teenagers under Control

The youth of the 1950s faced a world that appeared destined for atomic destruction. At the same time, they had access to more economic resources in post-World War II America than at any other time in the nation's history. As a result, America's youth was simultaneously given more economic power, while facing impending nuclear war. Economic independence and fear gave rise to a feelings of "adolescent alienation."[35] Many parents felt that the economic independence that teenagers claimed weakened their control over their children. James Gilbert argues in his landmark book on parental backlash aimed at comic books, *A Cycle of Outrage*, "Teenagers developed comprehensive institutions that reflected their new, if uncertain, status. A great many of them worked at jobs that financed their new consumer life-styles; more drove cars, more married early, more appeared to initiate sexual relations at an earlier age."[36] This generational antagonism seemed to be reflected in the data of the period that seemed to prove to adults that the youth were increasingly getting into trouble with the law. According to Gilbert, "Radio and television specials, newsreels, feature films, magazine articles, and newspapers examined delinquency as if it were something altogether new in this period of American history."[37] However, it seems the appearance of a juvenile delinquency epidemic was just that, the appearance of an epidemic. Gilbert argues that

[35] Grace Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.
[36] Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, 17.
[37] Ibid., 63.

the numbers which seemed to prove a new wave of juvenile delinquency were nothing more than a change in the methods of reporting created an artificial increase in the number of youth offenders. In fact, Gilbert argues that adjusted for changes in population, incidents of young criminals actually decreased during the years of the comic book scare. The crime rate in 1907, he claims, was five times higher than in 1950.[38] Even though the case for an increase of juvenile delinquency disappears, however, the reaction of the public to this scare reveals a society that wanted to find a salve for its neurotic obsession that somehow gender roles had shifted in the United States and as a result youth were out of control. Therefore many in America began to take a careful look at challenges to gender norms, specifically what was termed "sexual deviancy," thus setting the stage for Wertham's latter accusations of it being present in comic books.

Finding Hidden Threats to the Forced Consensus of Sex and Gender

In order for the American people to win the Cold War, it was argued, procreation had to occur in a stable, masculine-dominated home, away from invisible threats. As a result, homosexuality was perceived as a dual menace. It disrupted the idea of the home as a factory for future soldiers, and it was considered something promoting "effeminacy and narcissis[icism]."[39] Further undermining the masculine ideal was the notion that the homosexual was considered someone who could be easily compromised. Their willingness to be seduced by carnal desire was considered a moral failing that permeated their entire consciousness. Consequently, being gay in 1950s America was equated with feminine qualities of mental and physical weakness.

[38] Ibid., 69.

[39] Michael Snyder, "Crises of Masculinity: Homosocial Desire and Homosexual Panic in the Critical Cold War Narratives of Mailer and Coover," *Critique* 48 (2007): 252.

The Cold War American psyche also drew strong parallel between communists and homosexuals. For example, according to Gender Studies professor Kevin Ohi of Boston College, "McCarthyite ideology understood homosexuality and communism as linked threats."[40] This concern with the hidden threat of homosexuality and communism is perhaps most obvious in the 1950 report submitted to the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments entitled "Employment of Homosexuals, and Other Sex Perverts in Government." In the report, homosexuals were considered "security risks" and "contrary to the normal accepted standards of social behavior."[41] As such, homosexuals were a dual menace because aside from their attack on gender standards they might also be blackmailed by communists into giving up national security secrets. The concern with homosexuality in the government appears to be a precursor for the later fear of communist infiltration into the government. As a result, many government officials were extremely conscious of presenting a masculine identity. For example, Kyle Cuordileone argues that many liberals during this period felt that they had to be able to argue against being seen as weak, feminized, intellectuals because it carried the dual taint of perhaps being either a homosexual, communist, or both. Men were seen as the most vulnerable to the outside threat of homosexuality because they were the figure expected to leave the domestic sphere in order to provide for the family. Kyle Cuordileone that masculinity was considered a trait in need of cultivation for the feared future war with Russia. Therefore, when comic books perverted the masculine ideal, the public took

[40] Kevin Ohi, "Of Red Queens and Garden Clubs: The Manchurian Candidate, Cold War Paranoia, and the Historicity of the Homosexual," *Camera Obscura* 20 (2005): 155.
[41] "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government," Interim Report submitted to the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments by its Subcommittee on Investigations pursuant to S. Res. 280 (81st Congress). A Resolution Authorizing the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments to Carry Out Certain Duties. (1950). Available at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/context/employment.html

notice.[42]

Enter the Quack

Critics of comic books argued that the ideal of masculinity was altered in comic books so that men became monstrous villains driven by their lust for both sex and violence. One of the strongest critics of this sexual violence was Wertham. His assumptions about the effect of environment on the youth made him distrustful of mass media. For example, Wertham was suspicious of "the uncensored, unregulated youth oriented media" and feared the power it held over children, "completely beyond adult supervision."[43] He argued that the medium of comic books featured males engaging in what some critics at the time called "sexual perversion" or "sexual depravity"—the buzz word for homosexuality. Wertham took it a step further and argued that some comics actually created homosexuals. For example he argued, "Homosexual childhood prostitution, especially in boys, is often associated with stealing and with violence. For all these activities children are softened up by comic books."[44] He sums up his argument about homosexuality in comic books by stating that in comics, "The atmosphere is homosexual and anti-feminine."[45] Wertham argued in particular that the superhero genre was full of homosexual content including such characters as Wonder Woman who he claimed was a lesbian. He also questioned the relationship between Batman and Robin arguing that they too were engaged in homosexual acts.[46] In fact, a great deal of Wertham's criticism of comic books deals with sexuality as featured in comic books. "It

[42] See *Crime Smashers*, "Death Bait" Figure 7.
[43] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 93.
[44] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 187.
[45] Ibid., 191
[46] An allegation the creator of Batman, Bob Kane, categorically denies. (Nathon Tipton, "Gender Trouble: Frank Miller's Revision of Robin in the Batman: Dark Knight Series," *Journal of Popular Culture* 41 (2008), 321.)

is easy, in retrospect, to view Wertham's 'gaydar' as a hyperbolic reflection of McCarthy-era societal posturing."[47] Sensitive to the period's fear of homosexuality Wertham argued that comic books overwhelming presented images of men incapable of controlling their sexuality. For example, in the opening pages of his, *Seduction of the Innocent*, he describes a scene from one comic books he had studied: "Here is the lecherous-looking bandit overpowering the attractive girl who is dressed (if that is the word) for very hot weather in the typical pre-rape position. Later he threatens to kill her."[48] Wertham's argument seems to imply a duel narrative. First that women were typically presented in a position to be raped in comic books by men incapable of controlling their lust and, at the same time, that the way the women dressed ("if that is the word for it" he writes) made these women more open to sexual assault. Further, Wertham takes his analysis one step further by stating that the comic books not only showed men taking advantage of women, but actually trained young men to carry out such acts of sexual deviance.[49] At the same time, Wertham argued that in comic books when women were no longer of service to men, the women were often killed.[50] Taking his arguments a step further, Wertham argued comics portrayed "sexual deviants."

Without the public's acceptance of Wertham's criticism, however, his arguments would have been a lone voice of dissention. Wertham managed to capture many Americans' attention by presenting arguments that fit into the prevailing assumptions about homosexuality and communism. According to Cuordileone, "The idea that Communism promoted free love or sexual immorality went back to the early days of the

[47] Nathon Tipton, "Gender Trouble: Frank Miller's Revision of Robin in the Batman: Dark Knight Series," *Journal of Popular Culture* 41 (2008), 322.
[48] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 8.
[49] Ibid., 40.
[50] Ibid., 55.

Bolshevik revolution, when tales began to circulate about the new Communist regime's aim to abolish marriage and the family."[51] Hence Wertham's arguments were effective in garnering support because he linked comic books to communism, sexual immorality, and thus an attack on marriage and the family at a time when Americans were embracing traditional gender roles. His criticism was especially compelling to women who were in the precarious position of being expected to both raise children who abided by social norms but simultaneously did not want to lose the stature they had gained through their sacrifices during the war.

Wertham Comes to the Rescue of Motherhood

The rearing of children during the Cold War was envisioned as a patriotic act carried out by women alone. This notion of femininity gave women a distinct sense of purpose in the domestic sphere. According to social historian Susan Douglas, the mother during this period was expected to be, "wasp waisted perfectly coiffed moms who never lost their tempers."[52] The new uniform of a female was bright and cheerful, the hour glass shape molded "...through a variety of means," including "a new 'miracle fabric'—nylon."[53] Simultaneously, the mass media asserted that the female body must conform. Indeed, mass media insisted upon a bland construction of the nuclear family, complete with patriarchal father and an attractive, yet modest, mother who was complacent in her station. According to art historian Karal Marling, "The woman who suffered in silence, who worked like a dog and put everyone else's needs before her own, who washed men's feet with her hair and when given the chance asked nothing for herself—this was the

[51] Cuordileone, *Manhood and the American Political Culture*, 68
[52] Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female within the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 26.
[53] Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 28.

deserving woman."[54] Their counterpart was the saintly, giving mother, ready to sacrifice herself, not on a battlefield, but at home. The nuclear family melded with the U.S. Cold War effort. The masculine father braved the outside world to provide for his family while the feminine mother reinforced the home with consumerism and the wholesome educational message of mass media. Yet Wertham and other cultural critics like him argued that the mass media had somehow slipped through the control of mothers just as the youth were becoming cynical and outspoken in their own economic self-sustainability. Some mothers no longer held sole control of the purse strings. As such, Wertham's arguments which emphasized the "sexual deviance," "sadism," and violence aimed at women in comics was especially offensive to women. Wertham argued that children were being taught by comic books to act out the scenes. Wertham's critique tapped into the rising fear about the emerging adolescent realm, free from parental guidance. For example, "marketing strategists in the 1950's would target children with advertising, bypassing parental authority to appeal directly to American youth as consumers."[55] The loss of control at a time when society insisted on complete control of itself and others terrified parents who felt their children's growing independence. As Wertham stated, one mother pleaded with him to, "Tell me again it isn't my fault."[56] Thus much of the public outcry against comic books during this period, though headed by Wertham, was only successful because it was supported by women.

When children and teenagers began to bypass their parents in their consumption, they were in effect lowering the female station of dominance within the household.

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[54] Ibid., 32.
[55] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 360-361.
[56] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 163.

Considering all the mothers had to lose, it is not surprising that mothers would be the major force behind the anti-comic book sentiment. They would take their outrage to local committees and the mass media. For example, *The Los Angeles Times* writer Mary Callan titled one of her articles, "Sex and Sadism Rampant: It's Time Parents Awakened to Danger in Comic Books." In a blatant attempt at fear mongering the article describes the foreboding atmosphere surrounding comic books,

> Two kids squatting in the doorway light at a downtown cafe with comic books in their hands the other night brought to the surface a question incubating in my brain for some time. Just what effect, good or bad, do comic books have on children? Were these kids, away from the hearth of home and with a borrowed light as their helpmate, engrossed in the kind of unbridled children's "literature" that might lead them to a life of crime?[57]

Although the editorial starts its premise as a question of whether comic books are dangerous, the title makes it clear the author is threatened by comic books. Lest the reader feel her accusations are outlandish, she quickly cites an expert who agrees with her, Wertham. "He puts his answer straight: Some comic books are creating child criminals," she concludes. With this appraisal, the author is able to justify her tenuous position about comic books.[58] The article goes on to describe how comic books give, "full instructions on how to rob drugstores and where to hide the money."[59] Such conclusions are premised on the questionable expectation that juvenile delinquents are not responsible for their own actions and would certainly never fault another to get out of trouble. Yet even accepting such thinking Wertham was unable to give any documentation other than anecdotal evidence. As a result, many experts called his

[57] Mary Ann Callan, "It's Time Parents Awakened to Danger in Comic Books," *The Los Angeles Times*. November 1, 1953, C14.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

reliability into question. For example, Frederick M. Thrasher, a University of New York professor and criminologist, argued that "the major weakness of [Wertham's] position is that it is not supported by research data."[60] Yet as can be seen from this article, the author is willing to blindly accept his assertions and even comments that Wertham, "cites definite cases." The article finishes with a challenge to adults:

> How many parents have made a survey of comic books at the corner drugstore or the market? How many have stopped to read the kind that Junior has in his back pockets? Are they full of sadism, torture and lust? Or are they in the minority, tales of Disney characters or cowboy heroes on the side of the law? Probably from the ratio given, by Dr. Wertham they have a good chance of being the builders of violence and tough talking gangsters[61]

The use of Wertham's work to justify her own positions allowed this writer to prey on the fears of mothers about the invisible danger to the home from within. Further, it makes use of the mother's expected role as a creator of socially adjusted children, ready to fight the communist threat, and presented her with an excuse for her inability to do so. In a period that gave rise to the term "teenager," parents had found the first in a long line of fall guys for teenage angst and attitude. In the weeks following the release of *Seduction of the Innocent*, more criticism against comic books found a voice in newspapers. Lloyd Wendt of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote, "'The parent who does not acquire that antidote for his child is guilty of criminal negligence." His message was a powerful one for, "more than forty newspapers and magazines reprinted the editorial. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reportedly received twenty five million requests for reprints of the editorial for distribution in churches and schools."[62] In other words according to

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[60] Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books) Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Eighty Third Congress Pursuant to S 190 April 21, 22, and June 4 1954, 23.
[61] Callan, C14.
[62] Nyberg*, Seal of Approval*, 144-47

this view, parents who ignored the dangers of comic books were not only letting down society, but also should be punished because they were guilty of "criminal negligence."[63] While seeming quaint by today's standards, the threat of comic books during the Cold War was therefore considered very real. Many editorial pages expounded on the threat to children from within the country.

It is easy to see from this article that Wertham's conclusions were often exaggerated by those who used them. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this movement against comic books was not its sense of taking license with Wertham's articles and books, though they surely did, but the dismissal of the validity of that research. For example, one article stated, "Whether he has proved his contention that some such books have contributed directly to juvenile crime is debatable and, in a way, unimportant. The books he cites condemn themselves."[64] The author's assumption that the validity of Wertham's research does not matter, is an often repeated assumption among the mass media, during the comic book scare. There is a very real sense among those antagonistic to comic books during this period that the very appearance of comics is enough to justify their destruction. Some critics were much more honest in their critiques of comic books. According to Robert Warshow, a cultural critic of the period, "When Dr. Wertham tells us of children who have injured themselves trying to fly because they have read Superman or Captain Marvel one becomes skeptical." Warshow goes on to say, however, that he still wishes they would ban comics because he personally doesn't like them, not because he believes Wertham's arguments.[65] Warshow's argument is perhaps

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Lloyd Wendt, "Those 'Comic Books': A Warning." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 25, 1954, C2.
[65] Robert Warshow, "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," 1954, (Reprint, *The Immediate Experience*, New York Double Day, 1962), 65.

the most honest appraisal of comic books during the period. Despite the comic books' critique of culture, those against them could not really put into words the reason for their disdain for comic books, they were willing to cite Wertham while simultaneously disregarding his obviously questionable research methods. They used Wertham because they were unable to articulate their outrage at cultural norms being challenged.

Wertham's argument against comic books, backed by his advanced degree as a medical doctor and social psychologist, gave credence to cultural watchdogs concerned about comic books and who wished to force parents, specifically mothers, into taking action. Some critics charged that women weren't upholding their responsibilities as good mothers. This charge resonated with many women who were watching as the youth culture embraced what Grace Hale has called the "outsider," those outside of white middle class society who were thought by many middle class white youths to embody a more "authentic" lifestyle.[66] As children seemed more intent than ever to rebel by embracing what was not the white middle class norm, comic books presented characters that tore apart the prevailing ideological norms of the era and thus became purge worthy. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Norma Goodhue reported that the junior members of the Los Angeles District Federation of Women's Clubs attacked, "comic books dealing with sex and murder."[67] Simultaneously, other grassroots efforts focused on subjects that had a direct effect on women's rights. For example, New York publishers passed a code of editorial standards which would not allow criticism of authority figures (i.e., in this case mothers). Perhaps most interesting and important for women who still made significantly less than men in the workplace and for whom divorced might lead to destitution,

[66] Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 116.
[67] Norma Goodhue, "FWC Juniors Press Comic Book Cleanup," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1949, 12.

"Divorce should not be treated humorously nor represented as glamorous or alluring."[68] It is clear that much of the criticism presented that caught the public imagination was of a gendered nature which emphasized the authority of the mother in the home. This was part of a larger argument over the autonomy that the American teenager now had. It was clear that many young people were not satisfied with post war America. The older generation's belief in authority was suspect in the eyes of many teenagers. These feeling of distrust created a cynical view of governmental authority. As a result, those critical of comic books distrusted the books' criticism of the government.

The Rise of the Censorship in the Comic Books

The downfall of comic books can be attributed to their critique of Cold War society and testimony based on an expert handpicked by Cold War ideologues, Wertham, who preyed on parents' fears about the violent content in some comic books. Those against comic books chose to use Wertham's credentials, but not his research, as a source of legitimacy. Comic book critics disregarded the criticism of Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent* in their self-righteous zeal. Consequently, they ignored other experts with exceptional credentials of their own, including John Cavanagh, a medical doctor and psychiatrist in the navy. According to Cavanagh:

> Little factual evidence has been produced that the comics are harmful. A small number of cases have been produced in which comic-book reading has preceded or accompanied the commission of a crime. Actually does this prove anything? If it is true as we are told, that 40 million comic books circulate each month and that each one has several readers, should not their harmful effects, if any, be more evident? Emotionalism sells better than intellectualism, and makes better copy.[69]

[68] "Sex and Sadism Banned in Code on Comic Books," *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1948, A6.
[69] John Cavanagh. "The Comics War," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (Northwestern University School of Law) volume XL, June 1949.

Dr. Wertham was chosen from among a large group of experts because he gave the critics of comic books legitimacy. The criticism against comic books became so vocal that a Congressional hearing was held on April 21, April 22 and June 4, 1954.[70]

The Congressional Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency of 1954 was a fait accompli for comic book critics who wished to force censorship on comic books. Although Wertham and his followers were only able to present accusations, not scientific evidence, public opinion after the hearing turned against the comic book industry.[71] "Wertham failed to document any of his evidence and provided no footnotes or bibliography to verify his research. He simply expects the reader to trust his evidence and conclusions on the basis of his own expert credentials."[72] It was clear from the choice of Wertham as a star witness that the Senators sought to curtail the comic book industry. Much of the publicity surrounding the proceeding focused on Wertham, though many experts in the field came forward and denounced Wertham's conclusions about comic books. Thrasher stated Wertham's position was "extreme" and "not substantiated by any valid research, is not only contrary to considerable current psychiatric thinking but also disregards tested research procedures."[73] Thrasher wrote a scholarly article, in contrast to Wertham's work written in journalistic style. As such Wertham captured the attention of mainstream America looking for a ready-made panacea to their discomfort. His mass publications in newspapers and popular magazines aimed at mothers, including "What Parents Don't

[70] Comic books had suffered censorship based on strictly moral issues in the late 1940s as well. One of the biggest sources of criticism of comic books before the 1950s was the Catholic Church. For example, St. Patrick's Parochial School organized a book burning in New York. A few weeks later on December 20, 1948, *Time* reported another comic book burning organized in a New York neighborhood.
[71] Ashby, *With Amusement for All*, 313.
[72] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 158.
[73] Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books) Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Eighty Third Congress Pursuant to S 190 April 21, 22, and June 4 1954, 23.

Know About Comic Books" in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, reinforced his arguments to the public long before the subcommittee meeting was ever held. Therefore, Wertham was able to simply show up and make his claims to an already receptive audience. According to Nyberg, "The committee took a very respectful tone with Wertham" and "most of the questions were meant to clarify, rather than challenge" his position.[74] It is interesting that one of the criticism of comics presented by Wertham had largely been ignored by the public—his criticism of racial bigotry in comic books.

Wertham charged that the comic book industry depicted those of Nordic ancestry as superior to other races. He argued that the white skinned people in comic books were always shown as intelligent, strong, and of positions of leadership. In contrast, he argued, darker skinned people were shown as subhuman and subservient to whites. According to Wertham, comic books showed, "there are two kinds of people: tall, blond, regular-featured," and their counterparts, "inferior people: natives, primitives, savages, 'ape men,' Negroes, Jews, Indians, Italians, Slavs, Chinese and Japanese, immigrants of every description, people with irregular features, swarthy skins, physical deformities, Oriental features."[75] In fact, Wertham's accusation of racism in some comic books is quite apt. Some comics still portrayed characters in the minstrel show style and promoted extremely offensive stereotypes. Wertham's accusations of racism in comic books, however, never caught the attention of the American people the way his other accusations had because it did not fit into the popular outrage against social norms. However in his zeal, Wertham mistakenly chose comic books that were intended to challenge racial stereotypes.

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[74] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 899.
[75] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 101

In his testimony before the subcommittee, he argued that comic books were promoting such hatred to the young. In one of the more engaging debates of the hearing, Wertham misrepresented a comic book printed by William Gaines. Gaines used the term "spick" in the story to illustrate the despicable nature of racial attitudes directed toward Mexican Catholics. According to Gaines, "I was very proud of it, and to find it being used in such a nefarious way made me quite angry."[76] The public and Wertham had never bothered to take the violence, sexual situations, and racial slurs into context. Comic books after World War II were often written in a satirical fashion with a twist coming at the end of the plot. Thus the evil character who engaged in the domination of women was killed by his own lust, while those who used violence were often punished as a result of their own actions. Gaines' intent, therefore, was to use racial slurs to highlight issues of racism within the country, not to justify a racial hierarchy.[77] Yet the public had already sided with Wertham long before the committee was convened. Two things cemented the public's position on comic books. One was Wertham's zealous mission to eradicate comic books. The second was comic book producer William Gaines' testimony in which his attempts at wit and the lampooning of McCarthy-era politicians in his comics cost him the support of the Senators in the hearing. For instance, in reference to a comic book featuring on its cover the decapitated head of woman dripping blood, Gaines was asked by the Senators if he thought the comic was in bad taste. Gaines replied that an offensive scene "might be defined as holding her head a little higher so that blood could be seen dripping from it and moving the body a little further over so that the neck

[76] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 942.
[77] Keep in mind that many comic book writers and illustrators were young Jewish immigrants or second generation immigrants

of the body could be seen to be bloody". The disgusted Senator replied, "You've got blood coming from her mouth."[78] A *New York Times* article the next day printed a scathing review of Gaines' testimony that blasted his assertions about the comic book industry, turning his pride in the business into a seedy sense of backwards honor. In truth, Gaines was also the owner of Educational Comics that printed the biblical, historical, and classical comics that senators and many public committees had agreed were okay. The real issue between Gaines and his critics was one of control. Gaines was a prospective teacher and he had faith in the younger generation's ability to read his comic books as the cultural critiques that they were intended to be, whereas the majority of older Americans, led by Wertham, feared the growing independence of the youth. Many of Gaines's stories, though dressed up in horror regalia, were at their heart modern morality tales that promoted liberality. It is true that Gaines had a biting sense of social critique and that he unleashed it on politicians, the military, and Cold War society in general. In fact in his initial argument against Wertham, he quoted a judge who had previously allowed the publication of *Ulysses*. Yet Gaines's youthful enthusiasm and wit that he thought was going to ingratiate him to the public instead made him more suspect to the American public and the committee. According to Nyberg, "the intention of the hearings from the beginning was to force (or frighten) the publishers into adopting a self-regulatory code like that of the film industry."[79]

In many ways the comic book craze created its own undoing. The comic books of the period were popular because they represented something more than the regular fare offered by other media outlets. Comic books challenged authority, critiqued the social

[78] *Delinquency Hearing*, 102-104.
[79] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 1065-68.

norms of the period, and gave the youth culture access to a medium that they made their own. Once comic books found themselves targets of censorship, they were virtually neutered by the Comic Code Authority making them dull tools for reinforcing white middle class norms. As a result, they were no longer popular with the youth. At the same time, other media that had been securely censored began to slowly test the boundaries of acceptability. Within a year of the Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Juvenile delinquency, for instance, the film *Rebel without a Cause* was released. It presented a youth culture acting out against white middle class society and included a scathing refutation of parental authority. In the following year, Elvis Presley brought raw sexuality to television through the *Milton Berle Show*. For a brief moment comic books had filled a void in media. They had served as a source of criticism of white middle class norms. But after the Senate Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency led to the creation of the CCA, comic books become politically irrelevant. From the 1950s throughout the 1970s, the mass media continued to push against censorship while those in the comic book industry dutifully followed the guidelines laid out by the CCA.

The rise of the Left in America, during the 1960s and 1970s, led to a radical change in America's sense of government interference, which broke down the oversight of other media. From 1978 until 1993, it can be assumed, the comic book industry once again found economic success with sensationalized material. In contrast to the period from 1948-1954 when comic books were nearly driven into oblivion, however, this time there was no public outrage against the comic book industry.

Chapter 2: "We would have to kill off Aunt May, or have Spider become a homosexual…" : The Rising Sensationalism in Comic Books, 1978-1993

After the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency, the comic book industry was reduced to a few major companies that followed the new rules set by the Comic Code Authority (CCA). The comics produced after the advent of the CCA were no longer directed at a wide age range. Instead comic books in the post-Comic Code era were reduced to simplistic morality plays aimed at children. These comic books, above all else, reinforced white middle class norms. For example, the Superman line of comic books expanded to include *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olson* in 1954 and *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* in 1958.[80] The comics were intended to reinforce prescribed societal roles that reflected Cold War ideology. In addition, Westerns, because of their link to a romanticized view of the past, continued to be fairly popular and safe from criticism. Political commentary, discussions of race and inequality, and challenges to the status quo, however, were absent from plots through the rest of the 1950s.

Even in the early 1960s, comic books were still being produced for younger readers. For example, Dell's *Uncle Scrooge* was the number-one comic in terms of sales in 1960 followed closely by *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, both averaging over a million issues a month.[81] Beginning in the late 1960s, however, America began to enter into a period of political transformation and in the process became much more liberal. As a result, the 1950s emphasis on consensus changed to a focus on individual needs in the

[80] In 1978 these titles would be combined into *The Superman Family* which featured, Superman, Superwoman, Supergirl, Superboy, and their super dog, Krypto; It is worth noting that these comics acted like spin-offs that appeared in other media such as television. Once producers in either media found something the audience liked, they inevitably attempted to reuse the same formula because it was easier and more productive than trying something new. Therefore it is easy to conclude that the comics that proved to be the most popular followed a particular model seen in all of the superhero comics. I.E. supporting white middle class social norms.

[81] http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/1960s/1960.html

late 1960s. As America entered a period of change, comic books did as well. For example, the superhero genre began to outpace comics aimed at the very young readers. In fact in 1968, superhero comics made up over half of the most popular comics produced in terms of sales, while *Walt Disney Comics and Stories* dropped to 15th place.[82] As a result, comics aimed at children found it increasingly difficult to remain viable. This change of taste of comic book audiences reflects larger societal changes.

The rise of the political Left altered the United States substantially through the political efforts of men like President Lyndon B. Johnson and his Great Society program. The Left changed Americans' political and cultural focus from one based on forced consensus with an emphasis on the majority to one based on the individual and concern for minority rights. This process had a profound impact on gender and race (that will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4, respectively) in the United States. When the Right regained power under Reagan in the 1980s, the same political and cultural dynamics that caused the comic book scare of the 1950s might have once again threated comic books. But they did not.

Considering that the emphasis placed on violence in mainstream comic books of the 1980s was far greater than what appeared in the minority of comic books in the 1950s, it is surprising that a large public reaction did not occur against comics. Yet when looking at the politics of the New Right and the new conservatism in the United States, it is clear that the New Right's emphasis on Law and Order readily translated into a justification for violence if given appropriate validation. At the same time, as America began to rebound from the Vietnam Syndrome—the period after the Vietnam War in

[82] http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/1960s/1969.html

which America avoided armed conflict overseas and questioned its own status in the world—it began to reassert itself on the global stage. As a result, the United States and Russia entered a new period of Cold War animosity in the early 1980s.

Reagan cultivated nationalistic fervor that sought confrontation rather than avoiding it. As a result, many Americans turned from the complex political and social ideology of the Left to a more simplistic world view that divided the world based on perceived notions of good and evil. The content in comic books was never a source of public outrage in the 1980s because comic books reflected the larger political and cultural trends of the period; unlike the comic books of the 1950s that challenged the cultural norms of the time, comic books in the 1980s fit into the larger cultural landscape offering little challenge to New Right sensibilities. This becomes clear when observing the escalating violence in comic books.

Marvel Comics and the New Right Impulse in Comics

Part of this acceptance of wholesale violence was the New Right's emphasis on absolute terms of right and wrong. The hated years of liberalism had, in the eyes of the New Right, been years of self-doubt and hesitation. In contrast, Reagan's view of the world seemed to be stuck in the 1950s. For Reagan, the world was black and white with little gray. For example, when speaking of the Soviet Union he argued that "the forces of good ultimately rally and triumph over evil."[83] This view had a profound impact on his domestic policy; Reagan and the New Right came out as staunch supporters of the rights of gun owners, thereby condoning violence against criminals.[84] His policies were

[83] Ronald Reagan, *The Evil Empire*, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-evil-empire/
[84] Ronald Reagan, *To Restore America*, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/reagan-america/

popular, especially among the white middle class, because they reflected the need to feel powerful after years of economic malaise and suffering from the Vietnam Syndrome. However, underneath this brave façade many Americans, including Ronald Reagan, were terrified of a nuclear war with Russia. Comic book writers and artists seemed to understand this fear and respect it. Instead of highlighting the nuclear threat, as comics had during the 1950s, Marvel Comics almost completely avoided stories involving nuclear bombs. Being reminded of the nuclear threat hanging over them was probably not popular with audiences in the 1980s considering the advancements in nuclear technology. On the other hand, both comic books and the American people embraced the need for internal stability through tougher actions against criminals.[85]

Reagan's popularity and the rise of the New Right reflected the social changes and attitudes toward violence in America. The American people believed that crime was getting worse and the only way to change course was to embrace the American legacy of individualism and to become tough on crime by removing bureaucratic restraints on the police and emphasizing Second Amendment rights for citizens. The increasing violence in comic books mirrored the public's perception that crime was getting worse. For example, the number of people who supported capital punishment reached its highest point in 30 years in the late 1970s.[86] The impulse to get tough on crime continued to increase until it had reached dramatic levels in 1993. As a result, many Americans came to believe that there was too much red tape in the justice system. Some evidence gives their views validation. For example, in 1985, 5 percent of Americans said they had been

[85] It should be noted that there were more references to public protests against nuclear proliferation than stories involving nuclear weapons. (In fact, I only found one small scene with a mushroom cloud) This could be seen as an indirect way to highlight the nuclear fear of the period without risking a public response.
[86] Gallup Opinion Index, Report No. 158, 1978, *Law*, 20.

a victim of violent crime; however, by 1993, that number had increased to 11 percent.[87] Further, throughout the period from the late 1970s until the early 1990s, the public continued to perceive criminal activity as an escalating problem. For example, in 1993, Gallup showed that 93 percent of the population felt that crime in the United States was getting worse. One in four people reported that they were very afraid. At the same time, Americans reported a steady increasing fear about walking home at night (up to 43 percent in 1993 from its low in 1965 at 34 percent). One in four people feared being beaten up, knifed, shot, or mugged. Finally, the poll shows an increase in fear of being assaulted as compared to a poll in 1981.[88] As a result of this trend, people were also taking a more proactive stance toward crime and responsibility for their own personal safety. For example, the population who had bought a gun specifically for self-defense doubled from 1981 to 1993.[89] At the same time, 1993 surpassed 1978 in public support for the death penalty and 73% of the population favored sentencing juveniles as adults.[90]

Grimmer and Nastier

Stan Lee seems to have understood the importance of these changes in perception and predicted the need for comics to push the boundaries of acceptable content and the darker tone that would eventually influence American politics. In 1972, he joked that in order to keep readers' attention he would have to eventually, "Kill off Aunt May, or have Spider become a homosexual." He had no idea how accurate his prediction would prove to be.[91] In the early 1980s comic books were still refraining from the depiction of more

[87] The Gallup Monthly, December 1993, 339, 26
[88] Ibid, 21.
[89] Ibid, 22.
[90] Ibid, 36.
[91] Alan Dulfon, "Comics, More Marvel Moments," *Kingman*, December 8, 1972, 7, Box 2, Folder 5, Stan Lee Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; hereafter SLP.

than the merest hint of blood, mainstream characters and villains were becoming more vicious and violent reflecting the fear society had toward criminals or perhaps more accurately the fear many Americans shared of becoming victims. As that fear increased so did the menacing appearance of characters although this change was surprisingly gradual.

One easy way for artists to depict a grimmer, nastier villain was to show him or her with spikes. In late 1982 spiked characters who could alter their bodies into dangerous weapons began forming more dangerous appendages. In a 1982 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Sandman—a villain whose body was made out of sand giving him the ability to change form at will—makes his fists with spikes coming out of it. This also began to occur frequently in *The Fantastic Four,* a comic based on a group of astronauts who became superheroes and gained special powers after they were exposed to cosmic rays during a mission in space. The group was composed of the pilot Ben Grimm, "The Thing"—whose body was turned into orange stone making him invulnerable at the cost of his appearance; Reed Richards, the group's patriarch who could now stretch his body as "Mr. Fantastic"; Sue Richards, his wife who became the "Invisible Girl" with the ability to turn imperceptible and project force fields; and her brother Johnny Storm, "The Human Torch," who returned to Earth with the ability to turn himself into a mass of fire. Reed Richards normally used his intellect rather than his powers as a member of The Fantastic Four. When he did use his powers it was in a defensive manner such as using his elastic body to wrap up foes or escape from danger. However, in the early 1980s he began to use his powers in a more gruesome manner, shaping his fists into spikes and engaging in much more physical confrontations. Around the same time Spider-Man

exchanged his colorful red and blue costume for drab black and white—a signal that his character was also changing to fit the new darker America. The trend toward more ruthless heroes also marked the increasingly violence-oriented culture.

One of Marvel's most vicious heroes was "the Punisher" who first appeared in 1974 as a guest star in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129 and best expressed this transformation in American culture and more specifically in comic books. The Punisher was a Vietnam Veteran whose family was killed by an organized crime syndicate. As a result, The Punisher swears vengeance on all criminals and starts a war on crime. In the early 1990s, The Punisher was extremely popular because he mercilessly slaughtered criminals. His character was so popular that by 1993 Marvel had expanded *The Punisher* product line to include four ongoing titles, *The Punisher*, *The Punisher War Journal*, *The Punisher War Zone*, and *The Punisher 2099*—a futuristic version of the Punisher that although quickly produced and poorly executed averaged an annual publication of over 300,000. Yet, The Punisher was not always that popular or that violent. In the 1970s, The Punisher abstained from the use of deadly force. However, as Americans began to accept a war on crime under the Reagan administration,[92] The Punisher began to become more violent and as a result, more popular with fans.

It is apparent that by 1983-1984, the level of violence in comic books, including more popular comics, had accelerated. In the earlier era from 1978 through 1983 no blood was shown in any of *The Amazing Spider-Man* titles. Even guest stars such as The Punisher who used guns only used "mercy bullets," which incapacitated foes rather than

[92] See Gerarld Shargel, "No Mercy: Ronald Reagan's Tough Legal Legacy," *Slate*, available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2004/06/no_mercy.html

killing them.[93] In 1980, inventions such as "mercy bullets" should be understood as a means by which cartoonists could begin to normalize the comic's violence, showing criminals being shot without disobeying the requirements of the CCA. Furthermore, during this period when The Punisher attempts to kill criminals he is stopped and scolded by Spiderman.[94] This made clear to the audience that killing and excessive violence were nothing to be lauded. Yet, even major titles such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* would change by the mid-1980s. As characters became more ruthless another disturbing trend also emerged.[95]

Hide the Women and Children

Starting in late 1983, women and children began to be specifically targeted for violence. For example, Alicia Masters, girlfriend of *The Fantastic Four's* Thing and later Johnny Storm, is depicted with her body mangled and clothes shredded after an attack.[96] However, in the scenes that follow, her clothes are no longer shown as torn and ripped. The hesitation to go too far too fast is clear, but an obvious trend nonetheless emerged toward more violent content specifically directed against women and children. This careful escalation of violence becomes even more dramatic in 1985. The first non-normalized blood shown in *The Fantastic Four* appears on the child of Sue and Reed Richards, Franklin.[97] Further, in the same issue, Sue is attacked and shown in an almost

[93] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 201, 1980, 5.
[94] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 201, 1980, 27.
[95]Publishers increasingly courted older readers. For example, in 1978, 88% of readers were young and male. 14-18 year olds made up a third of the readers, while 48% were between 18-24%. ("Facts about the Marvel Comics Group and the 'Young' Male Market," Box 6, Folder 4, SLP); In 1987, *The New York Times*, reported that it was increasingly common for adults to frequent comic book shops and were more important than readers under 15 years of age, (Eichenwald, Kurt. "Grownups Gather at the Comic Book Stand," *The New York Times*, September 30, 1987.) Demographic information is considered "proprietary" and therefore generally unavailable. However through email interviews with Danny Fingeroth, Paul Levine, and Mel Thompson it is clear that readers in the 1980s through the 1990s were older than 18 (with those 45 and older making up a surprising 15% of the market) college educated, and on middle class.
[96] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 256, 1983, 19.
[97] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 276, 1985, 18.

sadistic pose with her clothing ripped, undergarments showing, with her cleavage prominently displayed.[98] There is little doubt that this scene goes well beyond what Wertham argued was the "pre-rape" position. To risk another round of public outrage would have proved disastrous for the comic book companies still weak from the late 1970s. Yet Marvel was able to deflect a great deal of criticism by arguing that violence was a normal part of American society in the 1980s. For example, when a fan took umbrage with recent violence perpetrated against Franklin and accused Marvel of "child abuse," Marvel printed the letter in the Fantastic Forum, the Fantastic Four fan page, so that they could air their rebuttal.[99] According to the fan,

> I have a little boy about the same age as Franklin, and every time he goes to preschool I worry if he's being taken good care of, if he's being watched, and if he'll come back home every day. Why am I so paranoid? Because of the newspaper, TV reports every day about some child being beaten, sexually abused, kidnapped, raped, locked in a cage, scalded, dismembered, etc. And now, it's in my favorite comic which I've read faithfully since 1966.[100]

In response, Marvel's then-editor John Byrne said that he too had a young daughter and was concerned with the same thing. However, he stated that the scenes reflected American society and that comic books were not in any way showing such violence in a positive way; rather "the two instances were the acts of established villains, used to underline their villainy. What after all can be more evil than an adult, especially a super-powered adult such as Doom or Annihilus, attacking a child?"[101] As can be seen by the letter and Marvel's response to it, there was a definite perception that the world was a more dangerous place. However, the tone taken by Marvel is one in which comic books

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[98] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 276, 1985, 16.
[99] Thomas Curlis, Fantastic Four Fan Page, *Fantastic Four*, 266, 1984.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

commented on that danger but cannot be held responsible for causing it.

Marvel's response reflected their understanding that sensational violence had become a normal part of the American media landscape. During the Reagan Administration, popular memory, with the help of film studios in Hollywood, began to reinterpret the Vietnam War.[102] These films ignored the psychological and political complexities which marked the previous decades' films. Films of the 1970s like *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Enforcer* (1973), and *Magnum Force* (1976) all used violence to make a point. For example, the Dirty Harry franchise was meant to criticize bureaucratic inefficiencies within the system that forced men to work outside of the system to get justice. By the 1980s violence in and of itself was increasingly becoming the point.[103] The disturbing violence and angry undertones in films of the 1970s were reactions against the violence of the Vietnam War. However, by the 1980s, Hollywood had stripped down films, throwing out the uncertainty of the 1970s, but kept the angry tones and excessive violence.[104] Films like *Missing in Action*, *First Blood, Rambo*, *Cold Steel*, and *Lethal Weapon* gave focus and legitimization to America's revenge fantasies. The main characters were all veterans of Vietnam, and like The Punisher, they were unhinged, invulnerable, and deadly.[105] These veterans often brought their martial talents honed in war to America and used them to wage war against criminals or returned to Vietnam to avenge America. For example, in the *First Blood* series, Rambo does both. In *First Blood*, he fights police bigotry in the United States and then later frees Vietnam veterans

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[102] Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, Dan Porat, Areil Duncan, "Forest Gump and the Future of Teaching the Past," *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 89 (2007): 171; Paul Boyer, *Promises to Keep: The United States Since World War II* (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2005), 410.
[103] Thomas Riegler, "We're All Dirty Harry Now: Violent Movies for Violent Times," *Probing the Boundaries* 70 (2010): 15.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] See also, Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 273.

from POW camps in Vietnam. Mel Gibson's character in *Lethal Weapon*, Riggs, uses his military prowess, honed in secret "Phoenix" operations in Vietnam, to wage war on criminals in the United States. In a hybridization of the two, the main character in *Cold Steel* faces a Vietnamese war criminal who had immigrated to the United States and became an Asian mob boss. As a result, audiences watched violence on a battlefield scale acted out on U.S. streets. A car chase and a shootout were not enough for U.S. audiences in the 1980s. Even Dirty Harry's fabled .44 magnum, first depicted in 1971, paled in comparison to Rambo's adept single-handed use of a heavy-caliber machine gun in the final moments of *First Blood* a decade later. But before any of these characters had taken the war on criminals to American streets in the 1980s, Marvel comics had already made heavy use of this tableau for some of their most violent comic books guest starring the Vietnam vet, Frank Castle, The Punisher.

Dark, brooding, violent stories proved popular in other media during the 1980s. In comparison, the new darker comics, still restrained by the CCA, were considered much less harmful to children than other media sources. As a result, the trend toward more violence in comics during the mid-1980s increased viewership without causing public outrage. Further, the New Right's war on crime, coupled with Old Testament religious fervor of "an eye for an eye" led to a sense that vengeance had to be justified. As such, violence against women and children legitimized the escalation of force by superheroes. As Americans were taking more steps to defend themselves, the comic book industry was actively looking for ways to justify a more rigorous response by the hero, thus vindicating an increased level of **sustained** violence.

Torture and Sadism

Writers continued to find creative ways for superheroes to use more excessive violence to appeal to new readers. As a result, they began to broaden the type of sensationalized violence shown. In 1985-1986, torture became common in *The Fantastic Four*. For example, Sue Richards is tortured and stabbed by a stalactite through several panels.[106] The situation is normalized when it is explained that the quartet are in a hellish dream sequence. At the apex of this tableau in 1986, Nick Fury guest stared in *The Fantastic Four* as a special agent who was captured by Adolf Hitler, tied up, stripped to his underwear and then beaten. [107] He is shown with a bruised face, which up until this point, would probably have been bandaged rather than showing the actual result of such a beating. At the climax of this story, Fury gets free and kills Hitler. This justified execution of Hitler met with much acclaim by fans in the Fantastic Forum of *The Fantastic Four* issue #297 a few issues later. Once again, the situation was normalized later by showing that they were actually inside of a virtual reality program.[108] There also seemed to be a growing fixation on torture which moves toward sadism and is no longer limited to women and children. And such storylines resulted in greater sales. A more established comic series, *The Fantastic Four* did not see the huge increase in sales that the newly established *The X-Men* and *Daredevil* titles did in the mid-1980s; however, sales did increase by about 10 percent during this period.[109] After flirting with this new style of graphic violence in mainstream comics, later artists didn't feel they needed women and children to justify an aggressive response by superheroes, as can be seen by the bound Nick Fury. Sensationalized violence had already proven safe from public

[106] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 277, 1985, 10.
[107] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 292, 1986, 14-15.
[108] Ibid.
[109] "Statement of Ownership," *The Fantastic Four*, 204, 1979; "Statement of Ownership," *The Fantastic Four,* 275, 1985.

outrage. Heroes could be more aggressive based on what they themselves faced. They were no longer acting to protect others, they were dealing out increasing violence based on self-defense.

The new hero who used violence to excess could justify these responses because the new Reagan-era outlook on America argued that the ends justified the means. Violent heroes were needed to deal with the New Right's pessimistic view of America which emphasized harsh punishments for criminals. This mentality even crept into mainstream characters like Spider-Man. For example, instead of lecturing the Punisher, as he did in the late 1970s through the early 1980s, Spider-Man begins to question his own ethics-grounded tactics which limited how he administered "Law and Order." For example, after a battle in a 1989 issue, Spider-Man thinks to himself, "If I'd walked away from this, The Punisher would've taken all of these guys out! That would've meant nine fewer gun-toting creeps on the streets."[110] Later, this more violent outlook toward criminals begins to influence Spider-Man himself. For example, in a 1987 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Spider-Man brutally smashes Kraven, a super-villain who hunted Spiderman, in the face, causing him to spit out blood. He ends up with blood on his uniform and running down his face and clothes.[111] Later in the same issue, Kraven kills himself with a rifle. The bloody aftermath is shown splattered in a close up picture.[112] This more aggressive tone was not limited to *The Amazing Spider-Man*. For example, Johnny Storm recognized in the comics that he needed to follow the lead of others in using violence against evil doers. "The world is growing more vicious and guys like X-

[110] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 285, 1987, 12.
[111] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 294, 1987, 4.
[112] Ibid.

Factor, The Punisher, and Wolverine have the right attitude" he states. "The Human Torch won't be left behind."[113] Clearly, comics were becoming more violent. The question remains, though, how did the public react to this new grittier content?

Those at Marvel clearly felt that the public wanted violence in all of its comic books even its most popular titles. Attempting to follow in the success of other violent titles, in 1984 blood was depicted in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, without being explained away or normalized through the narrative.[114] This may reflect the loss of circulation that *The Amazing Spider-Man* experienced in the early 1980s. Other comic books like *The Fantastic Four*, *Daredevil*, and *The X-Men* had all experienced increased sales during the early 1980s as they began producing more violent comics; yet until 1984 Marvel's most popular title, *The Amazing Spider-Man,* had resisted such changes. Their sales had not fared well as a result. For example, in 1980 when violent content was not yet a necessity for comic books, *The Amazing Spider-Man* sold over 600,000 issues, but by 1984, that number was less than half a million where it languished until 1993 when Todd McFarlane increased sales to over 700,000 with his ultra-violent depiction of the superhero.[115] The necessity of violence reflects changes that had been occurring in the wider society since the election of Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan's emphasis on deregulation, market forces, and the rise in new technology had a powerful impact on other media that was then reflected in comics. For example, in 1981, Robert E. Lee, the former FBI agent who had been appointed under the Eisenhower Administration to head the FCC, left the FCC. His exit marked the point at which the stifling conformity of the 1950s was fully purged

[113] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 371, 1992, 8.
[114] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 253, 1984, 22.
[115] "Statement of Ownership," *The Amazing Spider-Man*, 386, 1994; "Statement of Ownership," 215, 1981; "Statement of Ownership," 264, 1985.

from the FCC. He was replaced by Ronald Reagan's personal pick, Mark Fowler. Fowler was interested in Reagan's emphasis on encouraging "market forces" and the need to remove debilitating government oversight.[116] As a result, consumers had increasing power over the entertainment industry. The Reagan administration felt that if people voted with their wallets, then the content in entertainment would follow the demands of the consumer, regulating media through the market. Further, Fowler enacted policies that removed of antimonopoly statutes in commercial media. This resulted in huge mergers as all of the big three television networks became part of larger corporations. An emphasis on profit, rather than educating or providing public service, became the network's prime responsibility. If one recalls that some of the arguments in the 1950s against television, comic books, and radio included their failure to meet their obligation to uplift and educate the public one can see the change even more clearly. By 1981, it was clear that few in the new administration felt it was the entertainment industry's responsibility to provide a service beyond entertainment for the public. Reagan's emphasis on deregulation spread to other branches of the government, including the Justice Department.[117]

The changes at the FCC helped Reagan promote his interest in market forces over consumer protection. Reagan's emphasis on deregulation resulted in the 1982 antitrust suit, U.S. *v. National Association of Broadcasters* (NAB), under which the United States Government accused the NAB of practicing as a monopoly. The NAB had established a written code for television broadcasters in the 1950s and it functioned much like the CCA. In fact, the NAB even had a "Seal of Good Practice" that aired after programs in

[116] Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 6796.
[117] Peter Boyer, "Under Fowler, F.C.C. Treated TV as Commerce," *New York Times*, January 19, 1987.

much the same way the CCA approved comics had a "Seal of Approval" stamp on comic books that had been approved.[118] The NAB had functioned for several decades without government interference. The suit was brought because of the NAB rule against "piggy backing," which is showing more than one product in a 60-second commercial slot. When the Big Three refused to accede to Justice Department pressure, the NAB was brought to trial and lost on the grounds that "self-regulation" was less important to the public interest than "free and fair competition."[119] This ruling had major ramifications for programming. As a result, programming was left to individual stations, who had no single standard to follow leading to "violence of all types [that was] graphic and often gratuitous."[120]

Changes in technology further eroded programming restraint on television. One of the most fundamental changes in television in the 1980s was the rise of satellite technology that brought more choices to cable television viewers. Instead of a few dozen channels, consumers now had hundreds of choices with standard channels now available across the United States. At the same time, the decision to pay for programming led to the argument in the government that there was no need for censorship any longer because, the consumer could obviously opt out of seeing such content by not acquiring satellite or cable.[121] To attract the market, cable and satellite broadcasters found themselves pushing more sensational content as a way of competing against hundreds of competitor stations.[122] Finally, as if the changes in cable and satellite were not enough, the introduction of video cassette technology once again broadened the market consumers

[118] Val Limburg, "The Decline of Broadcast Ethics: U.S. v. NAB," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 4 (1989): 214.
[119] Ibid., 220.
[120] Bruce Linton, "Self-Regulation in Broadcasting Revisited," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (1987): 485.
[121] Eric Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 6549.
[122] Ibid., 6574.

had to choose from for their entertainment. When the Supreme Court ruled in 1984 that the recording of television by video cassettes was legal, the entertainment industry went through further tumultuous changes. Because it was thought that consumers watching a video in the privacy of their home was similar to the choice of whether or not to subscribe to satellite or cable, much of the content in video cassettes was actually uncensored as compared to what movies shown in theaters. This led to the rise of the "Unrated Version" and "Director's Cut," both of which promised more sensational fare for home viewing. [123]

The Direct Market

Reflecting the Reagan administration's emphasis on "market forces," 1984 was a watershed moment in the depiction of violence in comic books and led to a rise in a direct market for comics between 1978 and 1984. The direct market worked by having shops sell comics to fans directly through Marvel, without a distributor acting as a middle man between them. Before direct distribution, comic books operated in much the same manner as newspapers. A stack of comics was dropped off by the distributor, the newsstand or grocery store sold a certain number, then proofs of the unsold comic books were sent back to Marvel through the distributor for credit. In contrast, through the direct market, comic book shops bought a specific number of comics and kept any books that were not sold for their back issue bins. This increased Marvel's productivity, but it also allowed comic books to bypass distributers to get their comics to fans.[124] Without the middle man, the direct market began to act like the premium cable channels in that

[123] Richard Jackson and Fred Sanborn, *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*, 5th Edition (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.
[124] Keith Dallas, *American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1980s* (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2013), 11.

customers had to go to comic book shops in order to get their comic books rather than see them on display in the grocery aisle or newsstand. As a result, the idea of "market forces" fit the direct market perfectly. If customers did not like what they read in their comics they could tell Marvel with their wallets. Of course the opposite was true as well, and by mid-1980s it was clear that fans liked the new trend toward violence in comics.

Are You not Entertained? The Masses Applaud Violence

One way to gain a sense of how Marvel reacted to the New Right sensibilities of the 1980s is by studying fan mail sent to Stan Lee as well as fan letters published in the back of issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The X-Men*, *Ghost Rider* and *Daredevil* (recognizing the fact that fan mail was handpicked by Marvel). These fan letters show an audience that was becoming increasingly tired of the normalizing sequence.

As early as 1978, Stan Lee seemed to understand that at some point the content in comic books was going to have to change to meet the changing demands of an audience influenced by other forms of media. For example, in a 1978 missive from Stan's Soapbox—a monthly letter included in Marvel Comics—he discusses the changing media landscape and pace of life in the United States. "Each month the public gets more and more jaded, more demanding of new products, new surprises, new types of entertainment. The whole pace of life, all over the world, seems to be speeding up. We seek more books, more movies, more games, more cars—we want more of everything, and we want it faster and faster."[125] In a later issue, Lee makes clear that Marvel was aware that their fan base was getting fed up with stagnant plots hemmed in by the CCA. According to

[125] "Stan's Soapbox," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 195, 1978.

Lee, the number one question he received was, "Will comic books get better and better, or will the field just stagnate with the same recycled ideas?"[126] It is apparent that as early as 1978 Marvel Comics understood that they had to change their content.

Before the turn toward excessive violence in 1985, many fans were despondent over the lack of realism depicted in comics. For example, one fan wrote to complain that, "Marv Wolfman [an artist and writer for Marvel] seems to be doing a pretty bad job. His work looks rushed. The plots are usually boring because the F.F. are repeating their old adventures."[127] In response, Marvel printed opposing fan mail. According to one fan, "These things shine with the mellow effulgence of old brass worn smooth by years of handling, made precious by repetition as much as intrinsic worth."[128] However, the occasional praise could not keep up with the number of complaints that steadily grew more abusive. Some accused Marvel of producing another "kryptonite" story, a snarky statement about *Superman's* repeated use of kryptonite wielding antagonists in stories.[129]

The process of normalizing situations in order to show that violence was also turning fans off. For instance, a reader in 1984 argued about *The Amazing Spider-Man*, "Kill off Aunt May if you must," but the fan then begs Marvel not to bring Aunt May back after they had done so.[130] Later, a more vocal fan made his view clear in regards to bringing back Reed Richards after his apparent death in an earlier comic. "He's dead, now keep it that way!"[131] For some fans Marvel's constant normalization of content became too much. Exasperated over yet another return to life of Reed Richards, one

[126] "Stan's Soapbox," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 201, 1978.
[127] D. Touey, "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 208, 1979.
[128] Cat Yronwdde, "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 202, 1979.
[129] "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 307, 1987.
[130] Fan Mail, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 256, 1984.
[131] John Tranchina, "Fantastic Forum," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 295, 1986.

enthusiast wrote, "I quit!!! You've lied to me for the last time. On the cover of Fantastic Four #255, you tell us that Reed is dead. Then he isn't. This is just a stupid lie to sell comic books and you aren't going to fool me anymore."[132] Other aficionados let their bloodlust be known, writing "I think for a change you should kill a superhero."[133] In response to the ever increasing vile and vitriol over the lack of realism in the comics, Marvel responded by holding a contest over which superhero should be eliminated. "Killing a hero? Well, it's not out of the realm of possibility here at Marvel. But let's say one of the FF was going to die. In 50 words or less who should it be and why?"[134] When Marvel began to cater to these desires the fans applauded. For example, when Alicia Masters was forced to sculpt the deformed face of Doctor Doom by sense of touch alone, fans were riveted. One aficionado exclaimed, "Dr. Doom was never more magnanimous, more stately, and more cruel than he is here. Keep it up!"[135] Clearly, the fan base itself was tired of the normalization of violence that allows Marvel to push the bounds of acceptability and argued a more realistic and consistent sensationalism. Another fan expressing a thoroughly New Right philosophy toward crime questioned the bureaucratic inefficiencies of being a superhero, wondering, "When [Spider-man] and the Kingpin were alone in the Kingpin's office. Why didn't Spidey waste him?"[136] Starting in 1984 and peaking at the height of his popular interest in 1988-1989, many fans questioned the lack of killing in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. For example, in a letter sent directly to Stan Lee a fan asked, "Daredevil: A blind superhero with really no ability has survived this long. Why???? We love the old Spidey, but why is Spidey worried about killing his

[132] "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 262, 1984.
[133] Randy Cohen, "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 266, 1984.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Commander Quotey, "Baxter Building Bulletins," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 200, 1978.
[136] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 282, 1986, 14.

mortal enemies?"[137] This letter was not printed publically, and Stan Lee himself may have found the trend disturbing, because in his regular column "Stan's Soapbox," he asked fans how they felt about the new trend in comic books—dubbing it the *Dark vs. Light Controversy*. Most of the responses seemed to view the world pessimistically and concluded that comic books simply reflected the realities of the world. As one fan explained, "The X-Men comic is dark but no darker than the world in which we live...This and the many other Mighty Marvel Mags are not dark or light...just real to life.[138] Another letter sent directly to Lee by a 14-year-old boy is disturbing in its pessimism. According to him, "These darker storylines we have been encountering as of late are enthralling, compelling to our dark inner nature. These scripting forms are now essential to the audience of today. Teenagers are now exposed to drugs, sex and political corruption. God help us, it will spill toward preadolescents too. The naiveté of yesterday is gone; what used to be a facade of frivolity is now a dark, grim look at reality.[139] Another young man's pitch to Lee argued, "I have some good ideas, I believe you will be very interested in. I've created a character called the Phantom Jackal. He's a gothic morbid hero who brutally murders the criminals he captures and was once a crook himself. Jake Spencer is a small time hood who was killed by the mob. His body was stolen out of the morgue."[140] The message from devotees was clear; they wanted more violence.

Marvel responded in kind. By printing letters of this sort, Marvel was preemptively preparing the public for more volatile content and testing the waters for any

[137]Unknown author, Fan Mail, November 3, 1989, Box 21, Folder 2, SLP.
[138] Fan Letter, William Tucker to Stan Lee, 1989, Fan Mail Dark vs. Light Controversy, Box 3, Folder 7, SLP.
[139] Letter, Pat Hussey to Stan Lee, age 14, 1989, Dark v Light Controversy, Box 3, Folder 7, SLP.
[140] Letter, EE to Stan Lee, 1989, Fan Mail, Box 20, Folder 4, SLP.

signs of outrage which they understood would not come from fans, who clearly desired more violence, but cultural watch dogs who might be offended by the content. As it had adjusted its comics in the 1960s to reflect changing cultural and social norms, Marvel in the 1980s figured out how to adapt their comics to keep up with the demands of their readers by creating more violent comics. This change in content was not limited to Marvel Comics, their competitors DC Comics also changed the tone of their comics as well.

Perhaps one of the most audacious displays of fan blood lust is the "Death of Robin" sweepstakes to determine whether or not the superhero Robin should be permanently killed off. Fans dialed a 900 number to vote for the death of Robin, thus playing a direct part in killing him off and paying for the privilege to do so. As a direct result of their actions, Robin was brutally killed by the Joker in *Batman* #429. [141] The "Death of Robin" is important because Robin was a DC character and as DC had always been more conservative in the content that it showed, while Marvel Comics had been more daring with regards to its content, it indicates just how violent the mainstream market had become. For Robin to be slaughtered by a crowbar-wielding Joker epitomizes the mass movement toward more violent content was an industry wide process, not one regulated to Marvel alone.

The New Generation

In some ways, the new violence shown in comic books was a reflection of the interest in a new generation of artists and writers who began to build a large fan base because of their dark and violent work closely associated with their characters. Jack

[141] Aaron Taylor, "He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life": Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," *Journal of Popular Culture* 40 (2007): 349.

Kirby and Stan Lee became legends in the comic book industry during the 1960s, but few other individuals in comic books managed to attain their stature. Stan Lee was able to keep control of his characters through his position at Marvel Comics—while Kirby and others who gained a popular following used the fans to legitimize their rights to characters. For example, the creators of *Superman* (1938), Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, had not been given any rights to the Superman character they had created. In fact, though the *Superman* franchise amassed millions of dollars for DC Comics, both Siegel and Schuster were paupers.[142] Only after public pressure from fans, fellow artists, and writers were both men provided even limited financial compensation by DC Comics, and not until 1975 did they receive a pension of $20,000 from Warner Brothers, DC's parent company. Just before the release of the *Superman* movie in 1978 that pension was increased to $30,000 a year.[143] The plight of Siegel and Schuster worried newer artists and writers concerned about their own future and they began to argue for creative rights to their characters. They felt they had implicit rights to their characters and if they attained a large fan base then they could exert more creative control over them. This sense of ownership among the new generation was independent of whether or not the artist and/or writer had actually created the character, and it also challenged the notion that companies had sole ownership of a character. Simultaneously, media scholar Aaron Taylor argues fans' "authorial power should not be underestimated."[144] The fact that fans could be rallied by artists and writers to fight the upper echelons of corporate power within the comic book industry is indicative of the power fans now exerted on the

[142] Aljean Harmetz, "The Life and Exceedingly Hard Times of Superman," *The New York Times*, June 14, 1981, D1.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Taylor, 349.

industry.

With a renewed sense of empowerment, many artists and writers in the 1980s began to push against the CCA focusing on their own concerns, without regard for and sometimes in direct opposition to the corporations they worked for. In other words, Marvel and its editors may have tried to restrain artists and writers but because of time constraints required for monthly publications were often unable to do so. Many artists saw pushing the envelope in violent content as a way to become renowned quickly. It is therefore fair to say that many artists understood the need to tap into the desires of their audience's new sense that the ends justified the means when it came to punishing criminals. For example, Frank Miller's depiction of *Daredevil* is dark, brooding, and bloody. He took over the relatively unknown title in 1978 and was given a free hand to reshape it in 1983. In the years (1978-1983) that Frank Miller worked on *Daredevil* the circulation more than doubled, reaching 259, 013 issues sold in 1983.[145] Aside from his gifted artistic abilities, his success was a result of timing. In 1978, when *Ghost Rider* had begun pushing the boundaries of acceptable portrayals of violence, the New Right had not yet solidified its hold on America. However, by the early 1980s, the popularity of Reagans and the New Right led many readers to find Frank Miller's dark depiction of urban rot and his characters' violent attacks on criminals appealing. With Miller's success came autonomy. His popularity allowed him to establish a central position working on the major new DC Batman title, *The Dark Knight Returns*, a dramatic revamping of the Batman franchise, which at the time was mocked because of the deliberately campy 1960s television series that had starred the pudgy Adam West in skin-

[145] Statement of Ownership, *Daredevil*, 207, June 1984; Statement of Ownership, *Daredevil*, 195.

tight leotards. The camp and fun of the television series had made it a hit in the 1960s, because it embraced the counter-culture's mocking of 1950s norms. However, by the 1980s, the franchise needed a major over-haul to make it current. Richard Iadonisi, a comic book scholar, argues that what made Miller's work on the *The Dark Knight Returns* so successful was its mocking derision of Reagan-era politics.[146] Miller's work was so influential that it established the tone for the new darker self-titled *Batman* movie released in 1989. The film illustrated the new era of violence by ending with Batman remorselessly killing the Joker. Following Frank Miller's lead, Todd McFarlane's work on *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 1986 accelerated the violent content in Marvel's most popular series as well.

As power dynamics within the industry changed, even extremely popular comic books that had shied away from violence began to embrace it. This is clear in the darker path that *The Amazing Spider-Man* began to follow. Because *The Amazing Spider-Man* (*TAS*) was one of Marvel's most popular titles (its number one title in the 1980s) they were very careful about the content that they depicted in the comic. For example, blood was not shown with wounds until 1984.[147] However, in 1986-1987 under the direction of Todd McFarlane, it began pushing the boundary of acceptability. Far from suffering from the sensational content, *TAS* and other comic books began to experience a resurgence of popular interest. This was a far cry from the status, in the late 1970s, former editor of Marvel comics Danny Fingeroth recalls, when he wondered "if there would be a comic industry in five years."[148] As a result of his memorable and daring work, Todd

[146] Richard Iadonisi, "'A Man Has Risen,' Hard Bodies, Reaganism, and *The Dark Knight Returns*," *IJOCA* 14 (2012): 543.
[147] Dallas, *American Comic Book Chronicles*, 13.
[148] Author Interview with Danny Fingeroth, Sun 9/8/2013, 1:32 PM.

McFarlane became a comic book superstar. His success gave him the power to challenge Marvel administrators who insisted on upholding CCA requirements. Perhaps suspecting his success depended on his ability to continue to push the boundary of sensational work McFarlane continued to chafe under control of the CCA. Todd McFarlane quit Marvel Comics when his scene showing the character the Juggernaut being stabbed in the eye was stopped by Fingeroth for being too graphic.[149] This illustrates the difference between Fingeroth, who was a part of a generation of cartoonists who remembered well the Juvenile Delinquency Hearing of the 1950s and was still frightened of a possible backlash, and McFarlane, who had never experienced an economic downturn in the comic book industry and who realized like others of his generation that in the 1980s the power of comic book content no longer rested in the hands of the CCA but with the fans. They also recognized that the future of an artist or writer depended not upon toeing the line with the company, but with courting a large fan base.

1993 An Orgy of Death and Destruction

Realizing the new dynamics of the comic book industry, Todd McFarlane quit Marvel Comics in 1993 (taking several artists and writers with him), and created his own comic book company, *Image*, that became popular precisely because it did not follow the CCA. The success of *Image* marks a turning point in comic book's sensational content. McFarlane's practice of incorporating ultraviolent content lead to the creation of several new characters, movie rights, and his own televised show, *Spawn*, based on one of his comic book characters. Due to its graphic violence and nudity, it could only air after-hours on the premium cable channel, HBO. The success of McFarlane and *Image* in

[149] Fingeroth presents the exit of Todd McFarlane a result of Marvel's oversight, a byproduct of their adherence to the CCA.

1993 forced other comic book companies to push forcefully against the CCA. This transformation is best epitomized by the new storyline that same year that featured the death of Superman.

In 1993, with sales lagging far behind Marvel Comics, DC took the sensational violence that had proven so popular to its logical conclusion. In the past, named characters who died had always minor supporting cast members and most of the time even these "deaths" were normalized later. For example, Aunt May in *Spider-Man* was "dead" for 5 issues in the late 1970s, but it was revealed a few issues later that her "death" had been a ruse so that she could be kidnapped. However, occasionally a supporting character, such as Gwen Stacey and her father also of the Spider-Man franchise, would be killed off permanently. As the sensational violence continued, death scenes become more volatile and brutal like the suicide of Kraven the Hunter. Death became a way for comic books to raise slumping sales. Occasionally, this led to some humorous titles such as "Everyone Dies!" or "Someone Dies." Apparently it was not important who was killed off, just that the body count rose.

The "Death of Superman," however, marked a major shift as he was obviously the flagship character of DC comics and the public took the story seriously with many lay readers picking up issues as investments. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that the first printing of *The Death of Superman* set a record as the "fastest-selling comic book in history" selling three million copies.[150] Surprisingly, however, given the prominence of the character, there was little if any outrage in the United States. One of the few voices of outrage came from Michael Harris, a comic book enthusiasts, who wrote a letter to the

[150] "Superman Death Issue to Go to Second Printing," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 1992.

editor which appeared in *USA Today*. According to Harris,

> I have been more than familiar with radical sales-promotion schemes over the years. From the onset, I considered this "death of Superman" to be, simply put, a damn cheap stunt to pull on the reader. Certainly, no real collector expects Superman's "death" to be as permanent a concept as reality demonstrates, but what of the younger readers?
> Sure, it may not be as bad as the truth about Santa Claus, but then just what type of message is conveyed by saying that the archetypical superhero is "dead" and then bringing him back to "life" at a later date?
> D.C. Comics has taken a well-respected and widely known—even loved—character and degraded both the spirit of that heroic myth and the public's human interest, all for a very fast buck.
> There was a time when comics were fun and profitable and fairly honest in their intent. D.C. has made a big show of the death of Superman, the hero who began it all.

Even in Harris's rant it is clear that although he is grieved by what he refers to as a "cheap stunt," he seems to be offended more by the ability of DC to trick the public rather than angered over the violence in the comic book. (It should be noted Harris was correct in his suspicion DC would resurrect Superman.) The majority of newspapers did not notice this trend toward sensationalism.

One of the reasons that this peak in violent content in comic books failed to attract the public's attention was the advent of a new type of video game technology. As a result of the new digital technology video games' animation became increasingly realistic.[151] *Mortal Combat*, one of the first video games to make use of this new technology, for instance, made heavy use of comically large red blotches used to represent blood when a character was hurt. In 1993, the same year that Superman was killed, Senator Joe Lieberman helped spur public outrage against the video game industry by holding Senate hearings on violence and sexual content in games like *Mortal Combat* and *Night Trap*.

[151] Steven Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon and Beyond...The Story behind the Craze that Touched our Lives and Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001) Kindle Edition, 7749-56.

Lieberman's inquiry, distracted the press and the public from what was going on with comic books. Ironically, as a result of his congressional investigations, just like comic books had before them, video games were forced to adopt self-censorship and a content code. However unlike the CCA which upheld archaic standards from the beginning of the 20th century, video games suffered much less stringent self-regulation than comic books had.[152]

The violence in comic books peaked in 1993. Sales were at an all-time high. New comic book companies were on the market, none of which abided by the CCA. There would be no more updates to the CCA. Marvel Comics, no longer interested in working with the code, broke away in 2001 while DC Comics, which had always been less daring than Marvel Comics, held on until 2011 when the CCA became defunct. In an example of how far removed the public had become from the issue of violence in comic books, few newspapers reported the collapse of the CCA. In one of the few that did, *The New York Post* did its best to describe the changes that had occurred in comic books that caused Marvel to abandon the CCA.

> Captain America discovered in a compromising situation with a groupie. A cigar-chomping Fury cursing like a sailor, a bed-hopping female private eye and an anti-hero who blows up cars. Welcome to the world of 21st-century comic book characters, which have finally escaped the values of the McCarthy era. For the last 50 years, the Comics Code Authority dictated that good would always triumph over evil, that battles would be fought against space aliens or mutants, and that "females shall be drawn without any exaggeration of physical attributes. But in September, the comics world's largest company, Marvel, ditched the industry's self-regulating code and released a new line of comics with profanity, sexual innuendo, and more violence. "We got tied up in our superhero underwear there for a while," says Marvel editor in chief Joe Quesada. "Marvel is growing up with the rest of the country." And the fans love it. The three new titles—Fury,

[152] Nintendo actually refused to incorporate more violent content but, the Sega Corporation kept the fatalities and blood for their home systems. Perhaps as a result, Genesis's sales of *Mortal Combat* dwarfed those of the Nintendo system. Further illustrating the changing sense of consumer's rights to choose a product over the need to censor, Nintendo actually received thousands of angry letters from parents who were outraged that their children's games had been censored. (Kent, 7759).

> Alias and U.S. War Machine—have sold out in their first two months and Marvel has started to publish reprints. New York comics fan Gahl Buslov, 23, says deviating from the traditional goody-goody image adds realism. "You're reading something that hasn't been watered down," he says. "You just get more of a kick out of it when there are no limitations."[153]

The article was full of nostalgia for a time when comic books did not contain violence and sex. Alarmed at content in comic books, the author concludes that the CCA had kept comics in check for 50 years. In reality, the content in mainstream comic books had started changing in the early 1980s, but its slow pace of change did not attract public attention. Marvel Comics dropped the CCA in the same year that the World Trade Center was attacked. This may account for the lack of public reaction, yet it is clear that the process of incorporating more violence into comic books has occurred over long period of time. The slow pace by which Marvel Comics pushed the envelope of acceptability, starting with lesser known comic books in the 1980s and moving to more popular comics in the late 1980s allowed them to avoid a public outrage. At the same time in the 1980s, the United States became a much more conservative country. Ronald Reagan and the New Right had a substantial impact on how Americans visualized and reacted to violence. Far from enacting policies that would result in a vocal reaction against violence, the Reagan Administration described the resurgent America as a victim of the Left, and cultivated a sense of simplistic righteous indignation toward criminals. The violence in comic books mirrored these cultural changes, justifying a rigorous response by superheroes against crimes perpetrated against women or children. "Go ahead—make my day," the threat drawn from the action movie *Dirty Harry* that Reagan used when

[153] Mark Niesse and Megan Turner, "Super Filth! In New Comics, Action Heroes Caught With Capes Down," *New York Post*, October 25, 2001, 45.

confronted with a possible tax increase in Congress, epitomized the nation's new tough guy stance. The new trend toward being tough on criminals in the comics also coincided with Reagan's insistence on deregulation and the growing power of consumers over the content that they chose to purchase.

After suffering decline in the post-Vietnam era, the United States had become resurgent in the 1980s. This resurgence coincided with a mentality that embraced simplistic notions of good and evil along with a tolerance for violence. As long as the forces of good were ultimately able to achieve a higher level of violence than the villains, the public was willing to not only accept but also seemed to crave more savagery.

In this same period public concern with minority representation in media began to grow. While Marvel made incremental steps toward more violent content they simultaneously began to emphasize morality tales about bigotry. Further, they also become much more careful in how they represented minorities, initially characterizing them as villains and buffoons, then slowly altering characters so they were not such blatant caricatures of minority groups. By the late 1980s, Marvel could no longer simply ignore the mistakes they made when depicting race. Instead, they were forced to acknowledge and apologize when they offended the public with what could be construed as racial caricatures.

Chapter 3: Careful of Creating Caricatures: Marvel's Increasing Emphasis on Racial Equality, 1978-1993

Starting in the 1960s, Marvel began to produce some of the first successful comic books featuring black characters. They created characters who were more than mere caricatures of blacks. These comic book characters were meant as respectful depictions of the multicultural society. Their actions were a deliberate choice intended to expand Marvel's share of the market. Starting in the early 1980s, Marvel was under much more public scrutiny with regards to their depiction to minority characters and by the late 1980s, Marvel increasingly approached race in a sincere and sensitive manner. It could be argued that part of the reason that comic creators were sensitive in their portrayal of minorities was a result of the early guidelines of the CCA. These had been created to defuse the criticism of Wertham who argued that comic books systematically attacked racial equality and emphasized colonial era thinking in children. This view, however, does not take into account that newspapers reported with zeal Wertham's claims that comic books objectified women and taught young boys to do the same but almost entirely ignored the issues that Wertham raised about race were almost entirely ignored by the press. Still they gained enough attention from Senators to prompt the Comic Code Authority to set a guideline that that comic books not "ridicule or attack any racial group."[154] The guidelines are not clear, though on what was an "attack" or "ridicule." Because the code lacked such specifications, comic book publishers had to look to other media for examples of acceptable and unacceptable material. The fact that comic books are art and, therefore, open to interpretation made it difficult for Marvel to create

[154] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 2239.

minority characters that were absent of what the public might consider stereotyping.[155] Because Marvel could never provide proof that their comics were racially sensitive, they had to manage their image being careful to cultivate a progressive public persona so that their intentions in so far as race would not be in doubt. As a result, the stories that appeared in the comics began to gradually interweave morality tales about the perils of bigotry. In the period from 1978 to 1993, as the public became more sensitive to the media's portrayal of minorities, Marvel's comics became increasingly vocal in denouncing bigotry. One of the major contributors to this effort was Stan Lee himself who used public addresses, personal correspondence, and his monthly editorial, "Stan's Soapbox" to charm his readers. Lee's characters and plots were often meant to be morality tales that showed the folly of bigotry establishing a pattern for later writers to follow. It is clear that Marvel staff between 1978 through 1993 approached the subject of race carefully and went to great lengths to present itself as a paragon of racial justice. In contrast to Marvel's approach, other media was more willing to engage in the intentional stereotyping of minorities.

A great deal of media attention in the 1970s and 1980s focused on the anger of African Americans. As such, the broader American public had come to fear the "angry black man." Initially this tableau occurred in films of the 1970s, for example *Mandigo* (1975) and other Blaxploitation films made African Americans seem threatening to whites. This "angry black man" persona found its way into rap in the late 1980s. The violent and sexual lyrics found in music such as N.W.A.'s "Fuck the Police" and

[155] Recently many political cartoonists have had wrestle with the same problem, attempting to parody President Obama without engaging in what others could perceive as racial stereotyping. For example, *The New Yorker* was accused of racism after its now infamous political cartoon portraying Obama as a Muslim and Michelle Obama as a caricature of the Black Power movement. For a more recent example see "Cartoonists tread lightly when drawing Obama," *USA Today*, February 20, 2009.

"Gangsta Gangsta" (1988) reenergized the debate about the stereotyping of minorities in the media. According to Sociologist David Pilgrim in the 1980s the typical black brute in television and film "was nameless and sometimes faceless; he sprang from a hiding place, he robbed, raped, and murdered. He represented the cold brutality of urban life. Often he was a gangbanger. Sometimes he was a dope fiend."[156] In contrast to other media, African Americans featured in Marvel's comics highlighted a distinctly white take on black culture. As a result, while African Americans in other media seemed dangerous, those found in Marvel comics always worked in partnership with white characters and thus were benign. Further, in the *X-Men*, Marvel could discuss issues of race indirectly by portraying mutants as victims of bigotry. By using mutants as a substitute for other minority groups, Marvel subtly commented on racial tensions in the United States. However, since Marvel often looked to the media as a bellwether for acceptable content, it is inevitable that Marvel would occasionally create stereotypical characters and employ them in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. By the mid-1980s, ethnic characters who might have been seen as stereotypical were updated to reflect a more pluralistic society. As minorities became increasingly visible in other media in the late 1980s, Marvel Comics could no longer merely update their characters when the public found them offensive. Instead, Marvel had to begin to acknowledge when the characters they created contained caricatures.[157]

Marvel takes on Race

In general, comic books after 1954 steered clear of race by refraining from the

[156] David Pilgrim, "The Brute Caricature," http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/

[157] A good example of media burying previous works to avoid criticism of previous characters that embodied racial caricatures is the "Censored Eleven," (United Artists) a group of *Looney Tune* and *Merry Melody* cartoons that were not allowed syndication after 1968.

depiction of minorities in their comics. This was probably one of the easiest ways that comic books could avoid concerns they might be producing racially offensive comics. As a result, the CCA's insistence that no race be "ridiculed" or "attacked" in some ways acted as an unofficial ban on minorities in comic books.[158] Considering Marvel's progressive views about race, it is fitting that in the 1960s Marvel Comics ignored this unofficial ban. Headed by Stan Lee, Marvel producers attempted to create a world filled with superheroes that worked toward equality and moved away from bigotry. The background of many at Marvel supported this endeavor. For example, in the comic book industry many workers were not WASPs and chafed under the conformity forced on them. For example, Stan Lee was actually born Stan Lieber to Romanian Jewish immigrants. Lee and his colleagues faced anti-Semitism and many had taken part in the war effort against Nazi Germany. As a result, they were keenly aware of the dangers of racism, had a proactive view of racial equality, and aired their views in the content of their comic books. This should not be surprising when considering the deep level at which Marvel Comics was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that owes much to African American culture. Therefore, it may not be surprising to find that Marvel Comic's depiction of minorities—especially African Americans—appears to be much more genuine and sympathetic than other comic book companies.[159] This view complemented the larger cultural and political landscape of the period well. African

[158] Leonard Pitts, "A Comic Milestone: Superhero Diversity," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, April 12, 1994, 3.
[159] DC Comics' first successful black character was Black Lightning who did not make an appearance until 1978. He was created by Tony Isabella who had been brought to DC to work on their original concept, the *Black Bomber*. According to Isabella, "The Black Bomber was a white bigot who, in times of stress, turned into a black super-hero. This was the result of chemical camouflage experiments he'd taken part in as a soldier in Vietnam. The object of these experiments was to allow our [white] troops to blend into the jungle. In each of the two completed Black Bomber scripts, the white bigot risks his own life to save another person whom he can't see clearly (in one case, a baby in a stroller) and then reacts with a racial slur and disgust when he discovers that he risked his life to save a black person." According to Isabella he was forced to ask DC staff, "Do you REALLY want DC's first black super-hero to be a white bigot?" http://www.leisurelyhistorian.net/the-black-bomber

American culture was seen as fundamental to those in the counter-culture movement. This had major ramifications for the way in which African Americans were portrayed in popular culture including comic books.

After the creation of the CCA in 1954, for a while white youths abandoned comic books and had to find another way in which to express their disillusionment with mainstream America. Many who had once read comic books turned to Rock and Roll as a suitable replacement.[160] By the 1950s, white musicians—such as Elvis Presley—were bridging the gap that separated white middle class youths from African American culture. Rock's origins in blues and jazz brought many whites into contact with African Americans for the first time. Historian Grace Hale has argued that "'the blackness' of rock and roll made it a perfect vehicle for white middle class kids growing up with segregation to use in creating and expressing their felt sense difference from their parents and their middle-class world."[161] As a result, some youth found a sense of identity by embracing black culture. As many white youth of the 1960s became fascinated with African American culture, media executives were forced to grudgingly represent African Americans more often. As minorities were increasingly represented in other television, film, and music, Stan Lee and others in the comic book industry began to take note.

Marvel had been one of the first companies that dared to resume using minority characters in their comics. However, as Marvel's staff was predominately white, they relied on other media as a source of what black culture was. In an interesting twist, the characters that resonated with young white youths were based on the anger among African Americans who, in turn, were put off by these young whites who were becoming

[160] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 178.
[161] Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 50.

increasingly vocal and powerful in their opposition to the standards set by earlier generations. The influx of whites into the movement concerned and was resented by some blacks who feared that they might be losing their own positions to a white incursion.[162] The result by the mid-1960s was a push by black culture against white dominance particularly through Black Power groups such as the Black Panthers, who attempted to carve out a secure place in American society for black culture. This clash influenced those in the comic book industry desperate to regain their audience.

Marvel Comics, through the efforts of Stan Lee, was able to capitalize on this growing sense of young white disenfranchisement and black alienation by producing comics that broke from the societal standards depicted in other comics in ways that went beyond issues of race. Stan Lee's first successful work, the *Fantastic Four,* created in 1961, showed superheroes with human failures. Soon after the success of the *Fantastic Four*, Marvel began to produce more comic books that broke the mold established after the creation of the CCA of stagnant, dull works intended to impose Cold War rhetoric on the young readers. In 1961, Lee had intended to carefully follow the guidelines set by the CCA, however, by the following year Lee was beginning to question the "personal cost" of the Cold War.[163] As a result, Marvel started to produce comics that reflected a broader ethnic view of American society, and according to comic book historian Mike Benton, "Black faces started popping up in crowd shots by 1963."[164] Benton argues this was a result of the efforts of Stan Lee who was "out to make a point—that the ties that bind are more powerful than the differences that divide."[165] Lee's first step toward creating

[162] Ibid, 190.
[163] Robert Genter, "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40 (2007): 960.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.

equality in Marvel's comics was *Sargent Fury and his Howling Commandos*, a comic about a multicultural military unit which contained both an African American soldier, Gabriel Jones, and a Southerner, "Reb" Ralston. The characters gave Lee plenty of opportunity to explore issues of racial tolerance. By showing white and black characters who struggled with everyday life and had human frailties, Lee brought a level of success to Marvel Comics that had been unheard of and started a revolution in the content of comic books. Lee's comics were so fundamental to the counter-culture that in 1965, Spider-Man and the Hulk were recorded in *Esquire* magazine's "list of twenty-eight college campus heroes, alongside John F. Kennedy and Bob Dylan."[166] Robert Genter, a comic book historian, has noted:

> Marvel's meditations on the organization man, the scientific-military establishment, and the dangers of conformity echoed a burgeoning critique of America by radicals such as Tom Hayden and Paul Goodman. It was not surprising that in the early years the offices at Marvel received letters from college students at over 225 different schools. In fact, Lee soon began traveling the country, speaking at colleges and universities.[167]

Realizing that innovation was fundamental to their success, Marvel sought out contemporary issues that would resonate with readers, in particular, the civil rights struggle. For example in 1966, the same year that Stokely Carmichael argued for the exclusion of whites from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the "first real black superhero" the Black Panther, appeared in Marvel Comics.[168]

A Success and a Failure

Black Panther was meant to represent what a black superhero could be. A

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[166] Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 4.
[167] Genter, 974.
[168] Jeffrey Brown, *Black Superheroes, MileStone Comics and their Fans*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 19.

respected superhero who happened to be black. Stan Lee's attempt to create a sustainable black superhero was so sincere that The Black Panther—T'Challa—is still a viable character for Marvel Comics and praised by modern scholars. For example, in *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, scholar Adilifu Nama describes the Black Panther as an "ethical, incorruptible super-scientist," who kept his kingdom independent of white encroachment.[169] The Black Panther stood in contrast to black characters of an earlier age who were caricatures of blacks.

By the late 1960s, the growing radicalism began to have an influence on the new characters produced by Marvel. A good example of this radicalization can be seen in Marvel's second successful black comic book character, Luke Cage. In his first appearance and origin story in *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* issue #1, --Luke Cage was unjustly imprisoned and illegally experimented upon but as a result of these experiments he became incredibly strong. Unfortunately, the CCA guidelines were very broad in regards to race so Marvel used other media to decide how to craft a modern radical African American character.[170] As a result, Cage's character mimicked stereotypical black characters found in other media and was in fact, very different than Black Panther. Luke Cage is a more violent, brooding, and street wise character. His manners and actions were meant to emulate the Black Power movement. Cage was not a king like the Black Panther, but rather a working class African American from the inner city. Further, instead of wearing a simple costume of all black as T'Challa did, Luke Cage originally

[169] Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) Kindle Edition, 477-82.
[170] Danny Fingeroth of Marvel Comics notes that with regards to violence, "We generally adhered to the Comics Code and what would be acceptable on primetime network TV of the time, or what would be seen in a PG movie of the time." Email to Author, May 28, 2014. Therefore it would be a safe assumption that they also followed other media's depiction of minorities as seen by the similarities between Cage and Shaft.

sported an Afro, gold chains, and had his shirt open halfway down his chest complimented by his popped collar of his yellow shirt. It is clear Luke Cage's dress and demeanor were meant to copy the popular Blaxploitation film character Shaft, especially considering Luke Cage made his appearance only a year after the release *Shaft* in 1971, a film that both black and white community leaders condemned for "glamorizing the lives of seedy, menacing ghetto characters."[171] However, many African Americans must have found something redeeming in the films as *Shaft* made over $8 million from mostly black viewers.[172] If community leaders could not turn the public against Shaft then it was highly unlikely they could build a case against Luke Cage.

It is important to point out that Luke Cage, like other Marvel Comics characters, was beholden to the CCA and did not portray the sensationalized violence of Blaxploitation films thus rendering *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* and comics like it less offensive than the films they copied. His character was clearly intended to capitalize on Shaft's popularity and at the same time reflect a muted form of the attitude and style of the Black Power movement. Luke Cage proved to be a character whose "black anger" was less threatening to whites and far less antagonizing to black community leaders who were concerned with Blaxploitation films capable of reaching a larger audience and depicting far more violent content than a mere comic book. Marvel's coopting of the character of John Shaft in the form of Luke Cage, therefore did not cause any public outrage. Instead, Marvel followed what other media had already proven to be acceptable to the public.

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[171] It should further be noted that Luke Cage was originally written and drawn by white men. It is clear Black Panther was intended to be a sympathetic depiction, however, it could be argued that Luke Cage's appearance is more in line with a racial caricature; "Richard Roundtree: 'I came up with 'Shaft,' but I also sank with 'Shaft,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1979, T 32.
[172] Ibid.

To both whites and African Americans Luke Cage represented an innocuous byproduct of Blaxploitation films. His character was a watered down version of Shaft. For example, Luke Cage's trademark expletive is "Sweet Christmas!" and unlike Shaft, he does not kill.[173] Further, Cage's story was one of redemption, meant to comment on the unfairness of the American justice system. It is easy to see his origin story was a comment on the disproportional rate at which African Americans were imprisonment and meant to question the underlying dynamics of the legal system that might cause it. Having created a successful black superhero, Marvel's next attempt proved to be less marketable to both white and black customers. Marvel learned from its past mistakes and after struggling to create characters that were not offensive and had wide-spread appeal, Marvel was finally successful when in 1975 they introduced a reimagined X-Men that was multicultural.

Race as Depicted at Marvel in the Late 1970s to the Early 1980s

In 1963, *The X-Men* had been introduced by Marvel Comics to lackluster reviews. At that time, the characters in *The X-Men* were all white. In 1975, *The X-Men* were reintroduced with characters who came from all over the world, among them Peter Rasputin from Soviet Russia, Nightcrawler from West Germany, Banshee from Ireland, and a new female character, Storm, who was from Africa. Still as a new title the *X-Men* struggled in the late 1970s into the early 1980s. Though occasionally there was a hidden undercurrent of chastisement toward racism running through the comic in its early years, it tended to be vague or absent for large periods of time. For example, throughout its run from 1978 to 1981 the emphasis in the *X-Men* was on fighting with other super powered

[173] Sheena Howard, *Black Comics* (New York: Bloomberg Academic, 2013) Kindle Edition, 2923-28.

groups such as the Hellfire Club, Alpha Flight, Arcadian, other superheroes, and occasionally each other. The conflicts arose for various reasons ranging from a super-villain attempting world domination to petty jealousy among one another. Bigotry was not a stated motivating factor for any of fighting. Even their arch nemesis Magneto, a mutant with the ability to control magnetism, only fought with the X-Men because he sought world domination for its own sake, in complete contrast to later renderings of him as a would-be savior motivated by a sense of persecution and alienation created by human bigotry against mutants.

It may not be surprising then that during these early years, those at Marvel were less concerned with using the X-Men to tackle issues of race and more focused on maintaining viability. As such, they were not as careful about not engaging in racial caricatures used in other media. Storm proved to be an extremely popular character for Marvel and despite the occasionally racially insensitive way she was portrayed, audiences were captivated by her. She would come to represent a powerful black woman in a comic book whose audience was predominately made up of white males. Storm was not initially, however, portrayed in a dignified manner. Instead, in the early years her popularity was a result of the way she represented an exotic African other, which had historically been a way to justify the objectification of black women in the popular culture of the United States. Initially, Marvel's treatment of her as an object of sexual desire was ignored because in the 1970s American media still considered such acts as acceptable. Yet, Marvel was able to avoid later criticism of Storm because her character continued to evolve with the changing media landscape, eventually challenging established stereotypes.

The popular culture of the United States has a long history of objectifying African females while reaffirming the purity of white women. For example, in the 19th century Sarah Baartman, known as the "Hottentot Venus," had been abducted by an Englishman and displayed throughout Europe in a nude or partially nude state. She was a success because her abnormal large buttocks was thought to represent the majority of African women and therefore seemed to be proof that African women were more sexually aggressive, unable to control their sexual desires, and hence less refined than white women. Even as late as the 1930s Barnum and Bailey's Circus had put French Congolese women on display relying on the supposed sexual availability of these black woman to attract whites to gawk at them.[174] The representation of Africans directly opposed the way white females were portrayed as paragons of virtue who would never been seen in public without the appropriate dress and in the company of a protective male figure, usually a father or husband.[175] Europeans rationalized that African cultures were hyper-sexual because women in Africa were partially nude as a normal part of their culture. At the same time, cultural norms such as body mutilations were seen as indicative of sexual vigor. This seemed further proof that African women were sexual savages. Many historians and popular culture experts have noted and commented on the use of black women as sexual commodities for white spectacle. Though Storm would eventually transform herself into a respected member of the X-Men, her character initially embodied this sexualized African other.

Storm's African exoticness was also used to excuse the blatantly sexualized

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[174] Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 135.
[175] Bluford Adams, "A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empire," in *E Pluribus: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 175.

manner in which she was portrayed. For example, Storm is drawn nude in the first issue of the *X-Men* from 1978. Her long hair covers her breasts and pubic region to get the content past the CCA, but in contrast, at the same time, a white woman's nudity was only hinted at by a shadowed silhouette. Following an established pattern in popular culture, Marvel felt more comfortable displaying Storm—a black woman—in a more salacious manner. In a clear pattern of racial disparity, Jean Grey—the white super-heroine Phoenix—was treated as an equal member of the team. In 1978, it is rare to see Jean Grey drawn in a sexualized manner, nor are other female supporting characters drawn in the sexualized manner of Storm. Readers responded approvingly to the provocative poses Storm was drawn in. The level of interest in Storm's appearance was so great that she co-starred with Sue Richards—the Invisible Women—in a contest to decide her hair style. Marvel's artists ignored or intentionally avoided other female X-Men—like Jean Grey in the late 1970s and early 1980s—by reinforcing Storm's otherness as a way to further legitimize the exploitation of her form. Storm is drawn in such a way as to imply nudity through a tactic Wertham had referred to as headlight comics—as discussed in Chapter 3.[176] Perhaps as a way of downplaying the stereotypical manner in which Storm was portrayed, the setting of X-Men adventures in 1978 was often a proxy for Africa—called the Savage Land—a massive hidden jungle where wild creatures including dinosaurs roamed. The Savage Land was also an attempt to capitalize on the jungle comics that had been extremely popular in the 1950s but which Wertham and others had considered racially offensive. In 1965, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby introduced the Savage Land after waiting over a decade after the criticism of Wertham at the 1954 Senate hearing. Thus,

[176] *X-Men*, Marvel Comics, 122, 1979, 11.

"jungle comics" were in vogue once again at Marvel, albeit in a limited manner. By creating an alternative setting to the "jungle comics" of the 1950s that Wertham had so despised, Marvel recycled some of the old racial stereotyping. At the same time, Marvel avoided a backlash by the public as critics could not charge that Marvel was drawing a parallel with Africa because the Savage Land was not in Africa. As if to accentuate Storm's exotic nature, and "noble savage" identity, her teammate Banshee notes—while looking at Storm dressed for a frozen environment and thus fully clothed—"It's a grand outfit, but on [Storm] it looks I dunno I guess I'm used to seeing her in the wild."[177] As Banshee's statement reflects, when Storm is fully dressed and not on display she seems odd to her teammates. Yet this transformation also allows audiences to envision her as having been "civilized" by her association with the X-Men.

Storm is therefore used to highlight the civilizing nature of white male mentors even in comparison to contemporary African Americans. For example, Storm's civility is a byproduct of her time with the X-Men and is juxtaposed with the supposed uncivil nature of African Americans in the inner-city ghettos. For example, in *X-Men* issue #122, to highlight her sophistication and purity, Storm is dressed in all white as she strolls through Harlem. As she passes, black characters, who are obviously meant to be pimps and prostitutes along with those dressed in stereotypical African headdresses and afros stare with shocked faces as a dignified African lady walks past. Further, emphasizing her civilized nature, African Americans including beggars, are shown with much darker skin, in contrast to Storm's lighter skin tone.[178] Storm is thus drawn to highlight the implication that her time with the X-Men—under the tutelage of the Caucasian Professor

[177] *X-Men*, Marvel Comics, 120, 1979, 22.
[178] *X-Men*, Marvel Comics, 122, 1979, 15.

Xavier—has positioned her apart from other blacks.

If Storm's sexuality as an exotic black other needed the civilizing power of the X-Men to restrain her, then the sexuality of the black male was of concern in the early 1980s as well. For example, in a 1980; *The Amazing Spider-Man* Issue #202 shows Spider-Man with the help of The Punisher protect a cowering blond female from stereotypical black males who surrounded her. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of the climatic cabin battle in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which implied it was better for a white man's daughter to be killed than lose her purity to a black male. The way in which the villains surrounding them were characterized in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #202 makes the message even clearer. For example, one of the men wears a colorful wide brimmed hat—the stereotypical hat used in media to depict a pimp—as a woman cowers beneath him on her hands and knees. The scene implies that white women had to be protected from black males.

In the early 1980s Marvel still struggled with how to present other cultural identities without being offensive. In 1982, for example, Marvel was still using some offensive caricatures of Latin Americans. These caricatures were made worse because unlike those mentioned above, they were used as in an ostensibly humorous but actively mocking way. For example, Diablo—Esteban Corazón de Ablo—was created by Stan Lee in 1964 and used by Marvel into the early 1980s to represent a Hispanic villain. Yet Diablo was primarily characterized by his buffoonery. His character was so offensive that Stan Lee later said of him,

> I needed a villain very quickly for a Fantastic Four, and I came up with the name Diablo, which I thought sounded great, like the devil. I said, "Gee, Jack, you can draw this guy all black and scary and mysterious looking." And then I realized I didn't know what to do with him. Jack drew the guy, I couldn't think what power

> he had or how to use him. But the book had to be drawn quickly because it was due to go to the engravers in a few days. I don't even remember what the story is now, but I know I wasn't too proud of it when I wrote it. And I wish I hadn't come up with that, because that was dumb.[179]

Recently, in a 2013 interview with Chris Hardwick of the *Nerdist*, Lee insisted he couldn't recall the character, yet only a year earlier he had made the above comments indicating he was embarrassed he had created Diablo.[180] Lee's derision of the Diablo character may be a reaction to the offensive racial caricature that Diablo embodies, which while being obvious to the modern reader, was not out of place among the media of the time. Another Latin character, Anton Miguel Rodriguez—the Tarantula—was first introduced in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue # 134 in 1974 as a mercenary from South America. Miguel came equipped with various caricatures meant to highlight his Latin origins. Among his most notable markers as an "other" was his accented speech, which was meant to represent what Marvel writers thought Hispanic speakers sounded like. Further, his character was fond of using terms like "Caramba" and "Idiota" for comic effect. The speech was used to underline that the character was not to be taken as a serious threat and simultaneously called into question his mental capacity. In other words, his character was a fool meant to represent Hispanic culture. However, neither character was out of place in the broader media. For example, several academic studies in the 1980s, showed that minorities in children's television shows were marked by dialects that children associated not just with villains, but villains of lower intelligence [181] Further in the television show *Fantasy Island* (1977-1984), French actor Hervé Jean-

[179] Jeff McLaughlin, Stan *Lee: Conversations* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 185.
[180] http://www.nerdist.com/2013/09/nerdist-podcast-stan-lee/
[181] Julia Dobrow and Calvin Gidney, "The Good, the Bad, and the Foreign: The Use of Dialect in Children's Animated Television," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 557 (1998): 108.

Pierre Villechaize became well known for his catchphrase "The plane, the plane," delivered with his trademark French accent. Given the pervasiveness of stereotyping in television and the greater audience for television programing, it is easy to see why Marvel's limited reach, coupled with its audience composed of mostly whites, would have been seen as less threatening than other media. Further, in contrast to titles like the X-Men that initially struggled to build an audience, more established titles like the *F.F.* were vocal in denouncing bigotry.

As early as 1978, the *F.F.* starred Darkroth, Desmond Pitt who had been turned into a purple demon and then had been enslaved by Diablo, the same super villain mentioned previously. As a result of Diablo's control over him, Darkroth attacks the Thing. Yet in the end, Darkroth sacrifices himself in order to save Thing and exiles Diablo. In the final scene, the reader finds out that Darkroth was actually black: his identity had been intentionally hidden from the readers to have a greater impact. The message of African Americans working with whites for the greater good is clear in the scene's ending.

Though Marvel needed time to smooth out their approach to race in their newer titles, they made very clear attempts to promote a racially equal society in established comics. One way in which Marvel could present issues of race was with stories that involved Ben Grimm, the Thing. Although Caucasian himself, Ben's orange color sets him apart from the other white members of the F.F. and thus he is often used as the main character in morality stories about race. Occasionally, this resulted in an attempt to present material from an African American point of view. For example, in issue #220 of the *Fantastic Four* from 1980 Marvel reinterpreted the fear some white cabbies had of

picking up African Americans in a sensitive and delicate way. An African American cab driver thinks to himself, "I have to be careful who I pick up," as the huge Ben Grimm slips into the backseat of his cab. Though the cabby knows that Ben Grimm is a superhero, he still worries about the danger he represents to himself and his cab.

The Mid-1980s: A Changing Media, A Changing Marvel

Marvel continued to look to other media in order to decide what would be considered acceptable. In the mid-1980s the American media landscape was changing. For example, on March 31, 1983, MTV, which had been on the air since August 1, 1981, was forced by public pressure to air for the first time videos that included black artists.[182] The following September, the *Cosby Show* aired on NBC. Bill Cosby insisted the show met his approval in that it was free from racial caricatures that had marked previous characters in television like Huggy Bear from *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979). His insistence on respectable black characters was a marked success. The show proved to be the biggest sitcom hit on television in 20 years, and illustrated that there was a market for shows that starred mainly African Americans.[183] This was a wakeup call for many other media outlets that were still not representing minorities fairly or at all in their programing. Following the lead of other media that had chosen or been forced to integrate their content in the early 1980s, Marvel began to move toward a more racially integrated universe.

Except for a few select characters Marvel's content still did not do enough to promote racial equality in the media, however, other media sources received more

[182] Castlemon and Podrazik, *Watching TV*, 309.
[183] Lisa Schwarzbaum, "The Cosby Show's Last Laugh," *Entertainment Weekly*, May 1, 1992. Available online at http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,310369,00.html

negative publicity in the 1980s regarding their racial depictions. For example, as Marvel was slowly incorporating more African Americans into their comics, cultural watchdogs were increasingly disturbed by the violence and sexuality in music. Their focus was initially on heavy metal bands, but it quickly switched focus to rap music and its portrayal of women and celebration of violence. In 1985, Tipper Gore started and headed the Parental Music Resource Center, a group devoted to reigning in what they saw as excessive violence and sex in the music industry's lyrics. As a result of Gore's work, a Senate committee held hearings that same year with the intention of forcing censorship on the music industry. One of the results of this hearing was the now infamous "Parental Advisory" sticker placed on albums the group found too mature for children to buy without parental oversight. A byproduct of this hearing was renewed media attention on black performers, especially those working in the rap industry. English professor Linda Tucker of Southern Arkansas University argues that "the practice of blaming black rappers for social problems that have been and remain pervasive throughout American history and American society simply constitutes another manifestation of the tendency to demonize black men in discussions of the welfare state, incarceration rates and prison programs, the war on drugs, and male violence toward women. Assertions that hip-hop causes or encourages violence divert attention away from the violence wrought by social and economic inequalities and disparities."[184]

The impulse by cultural watchdogs to control black anger, which was a large part of rap music popular in the 1980s and early 1990s, may have somewhat unintentionally helped the comic book industry build an image as a "safe haven" for white male youths.

[184] Linda Tucker, *Lockstep and Dance: Images of Black Men in Popular Culture* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 132.

Gangster rap was a raw and unregulated media meant to express black disenfranchisement in the inner-city, while comic books presented a carefully crafted representation of African Americans controlled by a company staffed with predominately white artists and writers. The limited number of black characters found in Marvel's comics also made the African American presence seem less threatening as they were not featured as often in comics as other media like the music industry. Additionally, Marvel was able to evolve to meet the changing standards of what was acceptable when depicting minorities.

In 1981, the X-Men made a major break from the mindless action which had marked its early years. Marvel broke with convention by serving up a dark story that fundamentally changed the tone of the X-Men comics. *X-Men* issue # 141 of 1981 began the "Days of Future Past," a massive multi-issue reflection on the perils of bigotry. The story explores the titanic effect of the "mutant registration act of 1988," a law passed in the United States requiring all mutants to register with the federal government. Predictably many mutants resist and a war starts between the mutants and humans. The story is set in the aftermath of that war, a time when Sentinels, large robots used to hunt mutants, act as a police force. In the story mutants are sent to concentration camps, a nod to Nazi Germany, and separated from the rest of humanity. Given the tone of the story, it is not surprising to find that much of the action that drives the story is mankind's prejudice.

After the "Days of Future Past" storyline, Magneto becomes an increasingly sympathetic figure. His desire to control is motivated by his need to protect mutants from the hatred of humanity. As the decade progresses, Magneto's character was continually

refined, becoming more of an antihero than villain. He begins to explain that his actions are a reaction to the bigotry he has faced. His actions, though those of a tyrant, are increasingly driven by his urge to protect his fellow, "mutants." Marvel uses Magneto's character in "The Trial of Magneto," to further explore racism and bigotry. Increasingly, the X-Men focus on the reaction of mankind to mutants. While previously the focal point of the X-Men had been facing super powered villains, in the mid-1980s the focus is on regular human beings and how they react to mutants. As a result, there is less action and far more dialogue devoted to pointing out the evils of bigotry.

Magneto was not the only character that evolved to underscore Marvel's message of racial harmony. If Storm had continued to be the sole sex object in the X-Men as she had been previously, the way in which her character was objectified may have raised the ire of the public. Yet, this process of objectifying women became more universal in 1983, when other Caucasian female characters became objects of male desire as well. For example, since Storm was capable of controlling the weather in the mid-1980s she became one of the most powerful members of the X-Men. Her character become prominent enough that in the 1986 Issue #201 of the *X-Men* she successfully challenged Scott Summers—a white man—for leadership of the X-Men. This flew in the face of over a century of American media that portrayed blacks and especially black women as inferior.

When such subtle approaches failed Marvel could be much more blatant. For instance, Marvel often highlighted a villain's evil nature by actually having them use racial terms of derision that they knew would shock readers. For example, as late as 1985, the term "nigger lover," was used in F.F. issue #279 to highlight the racial tensions

that still existed in the United States as the super villain Hate-Monger, a mutant with the ability to inspire hate, turned different ethnic groups against one another. Recall from Chapter 1, that the use of the term "spick" in a morality tale by EC Comics had been used by Wertham to justify regulation against the comic book industry. Considering the tolerance for derogatory racial terminology in the 1950s, the use of such an offensive term in 1985—even as a way of highlighting the evil nature of a villain by verifying his bigotry—would seem to merited some sort of reaction. But it did not because the content was so clearly antiracist in tone.[185]

Late 1980s and early 1990s

In 1986, Pamela Rutt, the spokeswoman for Marvel, defined the new tone that Marvel would be taking in the late 1980s. She described Marvel as willing to tackle issues like racism. She announced the new emphasis when she said in a 1986 interview "Today's characters encounter many of the same problems as do their readers—racism, unemployment, pollution, crime—and have an equal problem in solving them."[186] In line with this evermore socially conscious outlook Marvel increasingly used mutants in *X-Men* stories as a stand-in for various minority groups, which kept Marvel safe from criticism by allowing them to diffuse the blame to many different groups. They did not necessarily focusing on issues of black and white directly, but by proxy. No one in a conservative age could accuse the *X-Men* of being too liberal because the comments on race were regulated to discussions about "mutant registration"—a direct reference to the forced registration of Jews in Nazi Germany—while bigoted characters use of the term "mutie" serves as a stand-in for more offensive racial epithet. For example, in a 1987

[185] *Fantastic Four,* Marvel Comics, 279, 1985, 21.
[186] Robert Ferrigno, "Comic Books with a Social Conscience," *Sun Sentinel*, Jun 02, 1987.

issues of the *F.F.*, ads in the storyline show black and white photos of children with one child covered with a banner that read "Mutie" over a Caucasian boy. The ad was an obvious attempt to address the fallacy inherent in racism.

In this same period, Marvel began to rework some of its stock ethnic caricatures. For example, when Diablo resurfaced in a 1987 issue of the *Fantastic Four*, he had been sculpted into a sleeker, fitter, villain. Marvel's staff sensed the need to reform Diablo. As a result, when he returned in issue #306 of the *F.F*. he no longer had his trademark accent. This might seem like a simple fix and not necessarily a marker for a new more politically correct tone to Marvel Comics if not for their immediate reaction to a new character a few issues later. Right after bringing back a reformed Diablo the following issue of the *F.F.* had a character that was so blatantly racist Marvel was forced to acknowledge it as offensive. Fasaud, a Middle Eastern character, drew the wrath of fans outside Marvel's fan page. Perhaps what makes the character stand out is that he was created in 1987, a time when racist material was increasingly viewed as offensive and without humor. This may have been the reaction that Marvel received from its fans for in the letters column of *F.F.* #314 (1988) the following apology appeared:

> The character of Fasaud was never meant to be taken as a slur against people of the Arab race, and we apologize to anyone who was offended by his admittedly stereotypical "Arab look." Sometimes, those of us in the comics business get so involved in telling an exciting story that we fail to see the "big picture." We would, however, like to point out that although Fasaud was a stereotypical Arab villain, here at Marvel we have characters who are stereotypical Arab heroes, he Araban Knight, from the pages of the Hulk, and Legion, from New Mutants. Again, we didn't mean any harm, and we will try to be more cautious in the future.[187]

In addition to a public apology, Fasaud was purged from Marvel Comics for

[187] Fan Page, *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 314, 1988.

several years. The actions taken against Fasaud clearly illustrate that Marvel was very concerned with ethnic stereotyping in its magazines. At the same time, Marvel built up a great deal of goodwill in the public at large by also commenting on other social issues. For example, in 1989, Stan Lee argued that his use of David Banner as a nameless wanderer was an intentional social statement to acknowledge the reality of homelessness. According to Lee, "The homeless are visible to everybody. Here in Los Angeles it's a real problem, even occasionally in the best neighborhoods. So I decided to use The Hulk to keep awareness of this tragedy in the readers' minds."[188] Further, throughout the 1980s Marvel Comics produced free Spider-Man comics that warned children and parents about the dangers of child predators and drugs. Beginning in the late 1980s, there thus appears to be a clear pattern of Marvel projecting themselves into the public sphere as source of more enlightened media that depict minorities in a respectful, dignified manner.

Stan Lee: Spokesman

Another reason that comic books were not targeted for racial biases in the 1970s and 1980s was because of the efforts by Stan Lee. Throughout his career as a lifelong spokesman for the comic book industry, Lee never missed an opportunity to pronounce the inherent righteousness in his comic books. When speaking about the racial content in comic books, Lee explained his concept of Robbie Robertson, a recurring character in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. According to Lee, "The publisher (in the strip) is a white WASP [Jonah Jameson] who is narrow-minded, unreasonable and usually unpleasant. The city editor is a black man who is understanding, compassionate, intelligent and an altogether likable guy. In a very subtle way, I think we are showing it is quite possible

[188] "Hulk is in Strip," *Comic Buyers Guide*, 8-25/89, Articles 1989, Box 34, SLP.

for a white man to be far less of a nice guy than a black man. Of course, you always offend somebody. I'm sure some white people are offended."[189] In fact, Lee's fan mail illustrates his concern with racial bigotry. For example, one of the letters that Lee kept in his personal library was from a young lady who in 1980 asked, "Why aren't there any black super-heroines? If there are please send info, if there aren't please create one."[190] Lee was obviously moved by the letter because he kept it in his personal file without publishing it. As recently as 2005, Lee reiterated his stance that equality existed in comic books when he said that, "Today you have people of all colors and nationalities [in comics], and that's how it should be."[191]

Further, Lee genuinely cared about issues bringing about a more equal society and had created a formula for writing social messages into comics. For example, in a personal letter titled "Examples of Typical Sub Plots" and "'Redeeming Value' Themes," Lee explains different ways to create morality tales:

> Some of the wealthier kids in school form a social club. They only want members from their own neighborhood and their own social set. This excludes the school's minority kids as well as Peter who is not one of the wealthy kids. Something occurs which causes the new club and its members to need help. It turns out that it's the excluded kids, with their own energy and abilities, who are the ones who can help. At story's end, the club members have learned their lessons, and they admit everyone who qualifies, regardless of background.

Lee had built his reputation based on his ability to create stories that had an underlying message of anti-bigotry. As such, Lee was able to not only create morality tales on the fly using the above formula, but he was also able to instruct other writers on his approach

[189] "Coloring the comics with a tint of racism: Exhibit in LA explores ethnics in the funnies," Articles 1989, Box 34, Folder 1, SLP.
[190] Jill Perkins to Stan Lee, June 1, 1980, Fan Mail-1980, Box 19, Folder 2, SLP.
[191] McLaughlin, *Stan Lee: Conversations*, 191.

as well. At the same time, Lee was never shy about proclaiming his revulsion to bigotry in "Stan's Soapbox" which appeared in each month's publication of Marvel Comics. He argued in 1980, "None of us is all that different from each other. We all want essentially the same things out of life-a measure of security, some fun, some romance, friendship, and the respect of our contemporaries. That goes for Indians, Chinese, Russians, Jews, Arabs, Catholics, Protestants, blacks, browns, whites, and green-skinned Hulks. So why don't we all stop wasting our time hating the 'other' guys. Just look in the mirror mister, that's where the other guy is."[192] Further, Lee's columns and speeches at universities were often on the subject of equality and race, which helped to spread his vision of racial harmony. For example, he recalled "There I was, making a soul stirring speech at good ol' James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia recently when one of the frantic Marvelites in the madly cheering audience reminded me of a promise I'd made a decade ago," to explain what a bigot was.[193] He then went on to define bigotry as "one of the many stains on the human escutcheon which must be eradicated before we can truly call ourselves civilized."[194]

Lee's approach did not mollify everyone as an occasional reader would note (correctly) that Marvel tended to have a limited number of minority characters. A letter sent in the early 1980s accused Stan Lee and his new cartoon based on *The Amazing Spider-Man* of being part of a "Society which fosters and indeed perpetuates negative self-images among its minority populations, it is even more devastating to learn of the popularity of yet another children's show which continues either bias reporting and which

[192] Stan's Soapbox, *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 215, 1980.
[193] Stan's Soapbox, *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 199, 1978.
[194] Ibid.

does not provide a positive role model for minority children." The letter goes on to suggest Lee "create a Black or Brown Spiderman or develop an educational show depicting blacks and browns in a more positive light rather than labeling, and providing society with 'super-heroes,' who are all white and whose manifest destiny is to save the world from villains, who are usually dark featured (who wear black or brown) but who are always far from being white in color or attitude."[195]

In response, Lee denied that comic books showed black characters in such a way, arguing "I'm surprised that you are unaware of the fact that Marvel does indeed have many Black superheroes. We have Power Man (Luke Cage), we also have The Black Panther. Then too, we have The Falcon who is Captain America's fighting partner."[196] It is obvious that those three characters made up a small percentage of Marvel's bullpen of characters, however, Lee clearly felt he was doing his part to promote racial tolerance.

Stan Lee was clearly concerned with the public's perception of Marvel Comics as racially progressive and actively sought out letters that would paint comic books in a positive light—especially with regards to issues of race. For example, Michael Scott wrote a letter praising Marvel Comics presentation of African Americans. In the letter Scott commended "the positive portrayal of Blacks" at Marvel. He further noted that Storm "is portrayed in a very responsible way" while acknowledging the attack on Apartheid governments as illustrated in "Black Panther's struggle and eventual victory over the racist governments of neighboring African countries."[197] On a yellow sticky attached to this letter, Lee informed his secretary she should "send a nice reply" and

[195] Fan Mail, Box 14, Folder 1, Correspondence 77-80 race, SLP.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Michael D. Scott to Stan Lee, October 25, 1989, Box 21, Folder 1, 1989, SLP.

"file—to show people if the need ever arises."[198] This indicates that Lee was always conscious of possible attacks that might be aimed at the comic book industry and its negative or limited portrayal of people of color.

Looking at the entirety of the portrayal of minorities in the comic books Marvel produced in the period from 1978 to 1993, it is clear that Marvel was not above reproach for some of their content. Yet, the overwhelming effort made on the part of editors like Stan Lee to promote Marvel as a paragon of social justice overshadowed the occasional blunders that they made. Furthermore, the content produced by Marvel was clearly intended to be a sensitive portrayal of race and reflected the best of what the comic book industry was able to offer as far as social commentary. Marvel's comics featured long running themes devoted to presenting minorities in a respectable manner.

At a time in America when people were becoming increasingly conscious of how race was presented in the media, Marvel comics was already in line with the majority's view that openly bigoted remarks and images were no longer acceptable. Further, while actual black performers were vocalizing their anger in music and other media, the black characters in Marvel comics were viewed as nonthreatening because they were controlled by a company that was primarily staffed by whites. As a result, there was no backlash against racial representation in comics as there had been in the 1950s.

This respectful tone, however, did not translate to Marvel's approach to female characters. With the decline of the limits set by the CCA, comic book companies, such as Marvel, were also able to slowly change their presentations of male and female gender roles and expectations because they continued to cater to the desires of their target

[198] Ibid.

audience: white males. By 1993, they had dramatically altered the established female form in their comic books, eventually achieving a hyper-sexualized form that became the new norm. At the same time, they made a desperate attempt to increase sales by diversifying their content in a manner they thought would appeal to readers who were not white male youths. Yet by carefully constructing their content, they were effectively able to fly under the radar of the public and substantially alter the acceptable content in their comics.

Chapter 4: Invisible Women: To be Seen and Not Heard; Marvel's Approach to Female Characters, 1978-1993

In 1954, the year the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency held its hearings, second wave feminism had still not impacted American Culture and the objectification of women was not yet a concern for the majority of the public. Instead, the gender issues the public focused on, evidenced by *Seduction of the Innocent*, news articles of the period, and the standards established by the Comic Code Authority, was what was referred to as "sexual deviancy," a catch-all term used to describe any sexual activity the public found unacceptable. Sadism, masochism, and homosexuality were included under this category. Further, Wertham, though he did not use this particular nomenclature, concluded that many comic books (especially the superheroes comics featuring characters like Wonder Woman, Batman and Robin, and Superman) modeled a homosexual lifestyle for children. He hinted that perhaps comic books could even influence a child's sexuality. As a result, the rules of the CCA expressly forbid homosexual characters from appearing in comic books. Because the comic book industry wanted to address the concerns about sexual objectification in comics by Wertham and his peers, before their arguments had a chance to influence the larger public, the comic book companies agreed to abide by standards that dictated the physical appearance and dress of women and men. The CCA enforced these standards rigidly in the 1950s and it expunged all but the vaguest reference to sex from comic books.

In the decades that followed, attitudes toward women and homosexuals began to change. Women and homosexuals began to agitate for a more equal role in the American workplace and for equal rights. By 1978, second wave feminism and gay rights activists

had dramatically changed the public's perceptions of gender. Gender Rights activists were particularly successful at altering the public's attitudes toward gender equality and homosexuality. Despite this new found respect for women, the public was unconcerned with the increasing objectification of women in comic book content from 1978 to 1993. A possible explanation for this lack of concern could be the conservative backlash that occurred starting in the late 1970s and the regressive gender politics that accompanied it.[199] For example, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution that was intended to ensure gender equality, was overwhelmingly passed by both the Senate and the House of Representatives in 1972 and ratified by 35 states in 1982. However, as a result of the conservative backlash that began in the late 1970s, many states including Nebraska and Tennessee that had ratified the amendment rescinded their votes shortly after, an indication of the undercurrent of conservatism growing in the United States.[200] In the late 1970s, as the conservative backlash grew in strength, Idaho, Kentucky, and South Dakota also rescinded their ratification. Under the Reagan administration the ratification of the ERA was allowed to lapse on June 30, 1982. Yet, feminists resisted the regressive gender politics of the New Right. The hard gains made toward equal rights, won in the 1960s and early 1970s, proved difficult for the New Right to roll back.[201] As a result, in the 1980s, the momentum for gender equality was slowed but not stopped. Much of the public under Reagan's leadership viewed the 1960s progressive politics as an attack on "traditional

[199] Bonnie Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), 86.
[200] Carrie Baker, *The Women's Movement against Sexual Harassment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 135.
[201] Bernard Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade From Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 6.

values."[202] Therefore, few Americans objected to the way the comic books, portrayed women as objects of sexual desire, and ridiculed progressive views of femininity. Further, Marvel's fans in the 1980s appear also to have gravitated toward "traditional values," appreciating the conservative approach to marriage taken by Marvel and deriding Marvel through fan letters when issues such as divorce were raised. The chauvinistic views reflected in Marvel Comics, therefore, rather than creating public animosity towards comic books, instead seemed to complement the larger view of the American people reflected in the popular politics of New Right rhetoric about gender. Although the leader of the "New Right," Ronald Reagan, acknowledged and praised the gains made toward racial equality during the Civil Rights movement, he still used racial antagonism to his advantage as he did when he spoke of the abuses of "welfare queens," a term which had a distinctly racial connation. The conservative rhetoric challenging the goals of gender equality, in contrast, was much more openly antagonistic. As Lynn Hecht Schafran, an attorney and vice chairman of the New York City Commission on the Status of Women, wrote in a 1981 opinion piece for *The New York Times*, the Reagan "Administration discriminates against women and women will bear the brunt of budget cuts."[203] At the same time, feminist theory had branched out and a clearly defined schism in feminist ideology was obvious by the 1980s between "standpoint feminists" (feminists who feel the point of view of women should be the focal point of feminist studies) who were much more concerned with cultural impediments to women such as their sexual objectification in the media and "post-feminists" who felt the goals of second wave feminism had already been achieved and were thus less inclined to find fault with media

[202] Ibid., 41.
[203] Lynn Hecht Schafran, "Reagan vs. Women," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1981.

portrayals of women.[204] As a result, there was no unified voice against the sexual objectification of women and the broader culture was increasingly defining gender equality as a social threat.

In this unique era, Marvel still modeled their comic books on what they thought young white male readers wanted to read. However, the downturn in the comic book market during the 1970s forced Marvel comics to try to appeal to a larger audience. [205] Initially, Marvel attempted to cater specifically to adults, kids, and then later, even women and homosexuals.[206] Their attempts were genuine, though profit may have been more of a motivating factor than progressive ideology. Ultimately, however, they failed miserably to expand their audience. Part of the reason Marvel failed to court women and homosexuals was the way they approached their work. Marvel's antagonism toward racism was clear (Chapter 3), however their attempts at gender equality came off as hollow and disingenuous because in the 1980s, women just did not make up a large enough share of the market for Marvel to put forth more than a token effort toward equality. Further, in the late 1970s through the 1980s, the depiction of homosexuals was still not allowed in comic books because of the CCA rules. This severely limited the characters Marvel could create and their allusions to homosexuality. Since Marvel's

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[204] Joanne Conaghan, "Reassessing the Feminist Theoretical Project in Law," *Journal of Law and Society* 27 (2000): 355.

[205] Literacy and education continued to rise from 1870 to the late 1970s. Beginning in 1980, the way in which literacy was defined and tested changed from the ability read to a more rigorous standard that included the ability to infer the definition of words. As a result, Marvel created more complex storylines and moved away from the simple plot lines that had been used in the 1950s. See: National Assessment of Adult Literacy available at http://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit_history.asp#illiteracy.

[206] Since the demographic information is considered proprietary information the actual audience during cannot be proven. However, through interviews with industry insiders such as Paul Levitz (DC) an assumption about the audience can be made. For example, Paul Levitz, one-time vice-president of DC comics, argues that in this period, "Generally most comics were sold through comic shops, where the typical customer was male, 16-30, on an educational and economic track that would lead to a middle class to upper middle class lifestyle. They tended to shop for comics every week, and were massive purchasers." Further, asked if there was a "target audience" being aimed at, Levitz responded, "God, no." (Author interview, email to Robert Howard from Paul Levitz, August 26, 2013.)

readership as late as 1976 was still made up primarily of males—over half of who were 15 to 30 years old—they had to double-down on methods that had proved successful in the past. The objectification of women was one of these methods. At the same time, because comic books were becoming much more violent Marvel normalized the more violent and powerful female characters by reemphasizing their femininity and sexuality. As a result, a clear trend occurred in the early 1980s toward more hyper-sexualized characters and a renewed emphasis on sexual content. Like the trend toward violence, it would have been obvious to the public if more attention had been paid to comic books. Yet once again, other unregulated media, in areas of film and music became the focus of public outrage.

In order for Marvel to compete, they began to intensify the sexual objectification of women. Young adult males in the 1980s were being exposed to escalating levels of sexual content—specifically through film and radio. For example, films like *Porky's* (1981) included plenty of nudity and sexual content aimed at a teenage audience while on the radio the song "Sex" (1982) by Berlin and "I want your Sex" (1987) by George Michael were popular. In keeping with this trend, in the late 1990s, female characters in Marvel comics were drawn in a hyper-sexual fashion. The violent content that appeared in comic books in the 1980s caused industry representatives—such as Stan Lee—a great deal of hand wringing. Yet, most industry insiders seemed to view the more voluptuous and vivacious characters with a grin and a wink. This was reflected in the updated CCA standards. For example the original specifications for costumes were:

1) Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure.
2) Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
3) All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
4) Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical

qualities.[207]

In contrast, the new standards created in 1989 were much less rigid.

> Costumes in a comic book will be considered to be acceptable if they fall within the scope of contemporary styles and fashions.
> Scenes and dialogue involving adult relationships will be presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience. Primary human sexual characteristics will never be shown. Graphic sexual activity will never be depicted.[208]

As a result, the revisions to the CCA in 1989 actually acted as justification for the way in which super hero bodies were portrayed as industry representatives claimed to follow standards accepted by society. They could therefore look at other media such as *Porky's* as a point of reference for the characters in their films. In fact, the fan mail shows that starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s the objectification of women seems to have been encouraged. The content produced after 1978 went far beyond what Wertham had complained about in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Once again, comic books begin to push the boundaries established by the CCA, without public outrage.

Other media sources freed from oversight that did not attempt to normalize or mollify their content, including the pornography and music industries, were much more likely to elicit the ire of legislatures and their constituents. In fact, like the comic book craze of the 1950s, the refusal to conform may have played a large part in their success. Meanwhile, comic books embraced conservative social and cultural norms because of the CCA. As such, we see in comic books a sort of *Happy Days* type nostalgia. In them men and women get married and have children. At the same time, the father is the patriarch of the family while the wife is expected to stay in the home. In fact, by the late 1980s, the

[207] Les Daniels, *Comix* (New York: Random House, 1971), 20.
[208] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 2316.

CCA was little more than a tool used to protect the comic book industry from the public. The CCA acted as a device to assure the larger public that comics that carried the "Seal of Approval," contained material that was innocuous like *Archie* comics. In reality, the CCA had been forced to change with the times and because of the direct market the CCA had lost much of its power over distribution. At the same time, distributors were becoming much more willing to distribute content that did not carry the Comic Code Authority's fabled "Seal of Approval." Finally, fewer comic book companies were part of the CCA, making the industry leaders like Marvel and DC much more powerful as the CCA functioned through payments made by its members. By the late 1980s, after the final revision to the CCA in 1989, the CCA had lost a great deal of power. The bigger companies like Marvel and DC advocated for a major overhaul of the CCA. The changes they made had major ramifications for the way in which women were treated in comic books. This fit well into a culture that had thrown out second stage feminism as a failed product of the 1960s and instead embraced a more conservative postfeminist model—a model that reasserted the inherent value of domesticity and argued that while a woman could compete in the workforce, to do so would come at a personal cost. Many Americans were concerned that women working outside of the household would begin to take on more masculine mannerisms while men would lose their place as head of the household.[209] Further causes for concern could have been the comic book industries strong ties to the pornography industry. There is clear evidence that the comic book industry was influenced by the pornography industry, however they were careful to keep

[209] Films of the period which reflect fears of role reversals include *Mr. Mom* starring Michael Keaton as a stay at home father along with other films such as *Three Men and a Baby*. The comedy of the films is based on the inability of men to cope with maternal roles.

this information from the public. Although a few bland academic studies aimed at other media, such as film, did comment on the objectification of women in media, comic books were able to avoid negative public attention because criticism of film was so pervasive in comparison.[210]

Invisible Women: Comic Book Women 1978-1984

The comic book industry operated—and still does today—in an extremely competitive market place. Marvel may have been the industry leader in the 1970s, but they were always concerned with finding more ways to expand their market share. It was actually Stan Lee of Marvel comics who came up with the idea of courting female readers. He questioned whether "females read comics [less] because they seem to be aimed at a male audience, or are they aimed at a male audience because less females read them?'"[211] Women and other minority groups represented financial opportunity for Marvel. Therefore, by the mid-1970s, Marvel Comics attempted to court females readers. Their efforts, whatever their intention, were offensive.

Marvel produced comics that featured caricatures of women. Much of the humor in these early attempts was aimed at second wave ideology—focusing particularly on painting feminists as man-haters—even while attempting to ingratiate female readers. It is also telling that professional writers did not work on these new tasks; instead the wives of staff members—including Stan Lee's wife Jane—were picked to write the stories.[212] At the same time, a sexual undercurrent lurked just below the surface of many comics aimed at females. For example, *Night Nurse*, a comic about working class nurses was

[210] For an example of books in the 1980s that studied the objectification of women in film see Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Methuen Publishers, 1983)
[211] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 250.
[212] McLaughlin, *Stan Lee: Conversations*, 160.

created because Martin Goodman (Stan Lee's old boss) "always thought there was something inherently sexy about nurses."[213] Clearly, the focus on sexy characters was intended to appeal to men, not women. To make matters worse, of the new comics aimed at female readers, *Night Nurse* was the least offensive and was one of the least stereotypical and managed to establish a strong following of female readers who wanted to become nurses.[214]

Other comics, such as *The Cat*, were more sexist. Originally introduced by Marvel as a non-super-powered vigilante, the main character, Greer Grant, was eventually given an ignoble super-power that bespoke the masculine attitude that prevailed at Marvel. Previously a housewife, Greer was given the super-power of "women's intuition." It is hard to view this as anything more than a derisive statement of a woman's role compared to Spider-Man's "Spider Sense," both of which acted as precognition. As if that were not offensive enough, Greer Grant was subjected to radiation—like Spider-Man—and turned into a furry feline. According to Comic historian Sean Howe, "the message of empowerment was lost on Wally Wood, whom Stan Lee hired to ink the cover of *The Cat* issue #1. Wood sent back Marie Severin's pencil art with the heroine's clothes completely removed, and Severin—who had more than her fill of boys' club shenanigans over the years—had to white out the Cat's nipples and pubic hair."[215] Judging from the response to the somewhat less offensive *Night Nurse*, if Marvel had placed greater emphasis on courting female readers, they might have been successful. Unfortunately, as the hijinks above illustrate, Marvel was steeped

[213] Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics,* 130.
[214] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 251.
[215] Howe, 131.

in a pervasive male chauvinistic culture.

Even when artists and writers attempted a concerted effort to show a strong female character with depth, their efforts were likely to be over looked. This was the case with Chris Claremont who updated and reintroduced Ms. Marvel in the 1970s. According to him, after cleaning her image up and giving the character a sense of depth beyond mere sex appeal, "Stan [Lee] said, 'This is what I'm after . . . tits and ass.' "[216] Later when Stan Lee was asked if Marvel was attempting to woo back lost female readers in the early 1970s with these comics he responded, "Yes, and also to appeal to the male readers who liked looking at pretty girls. Unfortunately, we weren't able to draw the girls the way they're drawn now, because I think if we had been, our sales would have soared much more than they did!"[217] Later, in the same interview, Lee redacts his statement when asked whether the way women were now drawn was an appropriate lesson to teach males and said he thought it was "stupid."[218] Clearly, progressive gender politics were slow in infiltrating the comic book industry.

It was not just the comic book industry though; even by the late 1970s the culture in the United States still promoted a patriarchal view. For example, in 1977 women were not allowed to serve in combat roles. When the mandatory draft was reinstituted in 1977 women were denied the right to register. Even when the issue was brought to the Supreme Court in 1981, the court did not even consider whether or not women should be allowed in the military. According to historians of this episode, *Rosker v. Goldberg* "upheld that exclusion with little analysis of the law's underlying justification. The Court

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[216] Howe, 221.
[217] McLaughlin, 160; For a historical look at the physical changes in female characters of DC Comics see Edward Avery-Natale "An Analysis Of Embodiment Among Six Superheroes In DC Comics," *Social Thought and Research* 32 (2013): 71-106.
[218] Ibid.

reasoned that the registration system was created to prepare for the draft of combat-eligible troops. Women were not allowed in combat, hence they could be treated differently in the registration system."[219] In other words, at no time did the court weigh in on whether or not women should be an integral part of combat missions. Instead they reflected and supported the patriarchal view that would not even consider the possibility. The sense that women's struggle for equal rights was not as important as the struggle for racial inequality clearly illustrates the inherent patriarchal attitudes of the period. Even by 1993, the end of the period of study, women were still not allowed in direct combat situations. These same patriarchal attitudes permeated Marvel's comic books. Women's liberation was only taken up as a topic for mocking derision, rarely as a serious subject. One possible exception to this general rule was *Wonder Woman* (DC Comics), a series that has enjoyed a special place in the hearts of many feminists, academics, and lay people as a source of what a woman's image could be in popular media. Her polar opposite, in the minds of many who study gender in comics, is Sue Storm—The Invisible Woman. While Wonder Woman bravely faced down her enemies in direct face to face combat, Sue's most commonly used power was her ability to become invisible and therefore hide, inevitably leaving her as an object in need of rescue and protection by the other male members of the team. Occasionally, this subtext becomes overbearing. In the case of *Fantastic Four* #235 (1981), when Reed stops the mission to help Sue from their spaceship and onto the surface of an alien planet, Reed tells her, "Careful darling the decaying surface is slippery and treacherous underfoot." As he says this Reed offers Sue his hand to help her out of the spaceship. His action may appear to be chivalrous but it

[219] Winston Langley and Vivian Fox, *Women's Rights in the United States* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 305.

seems illogical. Does Sue Richards—who has projected force fields to stop herself from falling off of skyscrapers—really need Reed to help her drop two feet to the ground?[220] In other issues, Reed's domineering attitude toward Sue becomes increasingly possessive and overbearing; however, his attitudes and actions are presented as justified reactions to events within the story. For example, in a 1981 issue of *F.F.* (#227), Sue is possessed and it is only Reed's touch that can free her. Whatever its intention, the scene comes off as very sexually domineering, especially when Reed tackles Sue while professing his love for her. As Reed explains to Sue, "A while ago you wouldn't let me touch you, but you weren't in control then-and you are now, Sue. And you're going to let me touch you, Sue—touch you because I love you."[221] Clearly, the scenario was intended to come across as a "Love conquerors all" story arc; however, Reed's domineering manner is disturbing in that it assumes that women would allow or even need to be physically controlled by a man. Yet, in later issues, starting in the mid-1980s, when Marvel makes an effort to reimagine Sue as a more independent woman, they received fan mail that chastised the move. One fan reprimanded then-editor Jim Shooter, asking him to, "Remember Reed's love for Sue, almost to the point of fanaticism, when he didn't want her to go because they were too dangerous?"[222] Fans enjoyed the patriarchal family system in *Fantastic Four* and some were clearly disturbed by Marvel's attempts to reimagine the relationship between Sue and Reed Richards. In contrast, many critics have argued that Sue's abilities are another form of male chauvinism, for her powers can only be used to avoid confrontation. What these critics fail to realize is that Sue's powers

[220] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 235, 1981, 12.
[221] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 227, 1981, 16.
[222] JRG, Fantastic Four Fan Page, *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 226, 1981.

might have been a way for Lee to avoid depicting violence against women. Not all comic book heroines could hide behind a protective force field to avoid being hit. Clearly, if women were going to be engaged in physical altercations, then Marvel had to find a way in which to normalize violence against them. Unfortunately, in most cases they did so through a disturbing use of a backhand slap which has been used in other media to deride women as weak and undeserving of a man's full attention.

The Backhand

The backhand slap is especially disturbing because it has been used so often that it has become an accepted convention in comic books. Though nothing new, it is surprising that more women, exposed to a progressive form of gender politics in the 1970s, did not find the content offensive enough to warrant discussion. That said, it is possible that the failure to attract more female readers during the 1970s may have been a response. In any case, a clear pattern of specific violence against women emerges in comic books of this era. Further, the backhand was not limited to any particular comic book title nor to any period of time. For example, as late as 1992, *Ghost Rider* #40 shows a woman being backhanded. Sadly, the backhand has become so common it is possible to discern a pattern for when it is most prevalently used in three particular circumstances: to bring women to their senses, as a means of derisively dismissing women, or, perhaps most disturbingly, as a way of expressing acceptable levels of violence against women.

The backhand was used as a tool to bring women to their senses is a tableau that occurred in early comics of the 1950s and survived well into the 1990s. For example, in the *X-Men* #111, Jean Grey was backhanded by Wolverine because she had been hypnotized.[223]

[223] *X-Men*, Marvel Comics, 111, 1978, 23.

As late as 1988, in issue #311 of the *F.F.*, Ben backhands Sue Richards to bring her back to reality, and that same year, Mary Jane in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #308 is also assaulted in a similar manner.[224] In an alarming 1980 issue of the *F.F.*, the story reflects traditional gender roles as modeled by Sue and Reed. When Franklin sees Sue and Reed kissing he cheers his domineering father on, "Smooch her again Daddy! I like it when you smooch mommy!"[225] Later, when Franklin has been possessed, Reed backhands Sue because she was going to kill Franklin. In response Franklin replies, "Hit her again Daddy. I like it when you hit mommy."[226] In the same year, even extremely popular mainstream comic books like *The Amazing Spider-Man* used this convention. Spider-Man backhands Dazzler in issue #203, but only—or so the audience is informed—for good reason. She has been possessed, thereby legitimizing the violence.

Aside from being a tool for bringing women to their senses the backhand could also be used as a tool of derision and punishment such is the case of *F.F.* # 259 when Doctor Doom chides Sue, "Such a greeting. Is that how you address your better's woman? I had thought you a lady. Since you insist on speaking like a kitchen wench I shall treat you as one."[227] As super-heroines became standard participants in comic books, creators had to figure out how to show physical confrontations without alarming the public; the backhand became a tool for artists to carry out a restrained violence against female characters. The concern over the public's reaction is clear as Spider-Man explains to the audience in his battle with the Black Cat, "I can't belt her like I do my other foes, besides there is something I really like about her."[228] With that he hit her with a backhanded slap

[224] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 308, 1988, 10.
[225] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 222, 1980, 2.
[226] Ibid, 18.
[227] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 259, 1983, 28.
[228] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 195, 1979, 25.

throwing her against a wall.[229] Marvel Comics was—in effect—arguing that the backhand was a chivalrous gesture. Marvel and other comic book companies were concerned with the way violence was perpetrated against women. For example, Charlie Boatner of the *International Comics Journal* believes the editor-in-chief at Marvel Comics in the 1980s, Jim Shooter, coined the saying "stand and point," which meant that women characters in action sequences were used to draw the attention of other male heroes while staying out of the action.[230] Further, it gave artists an opportunity to draw female characters in more fully sexualized body poses. This reflects the emphasis that female characters were meant to be seen rather than be an active part of the team. It is clear Marvel feared a possible public backlash against violence directed toward women in the early 1980, but was never concerned with objectifying the female form.

Women as Sex Objects

Female characters became much more voluptuous between 1978 and 1993 while their costumes became more revealing. However, Marvel made use of the female form without concern of the public's reaction. This was achieved with juvenile nods and winks implying a notion that boys would be boys and that the characters shown and the message being sent was a harmless one. Even as early as 1978, comic books employed voyeurism as a harmless past time. For example, in advertisements for X-ray specks included in Marvel Comics, the picture has a young man looking at his own skeletal hand and a young woman fully clothed but obviously about to be viewed nude with help of the glasses. In the same year, advertisements for telescopes showed a young man looking out at a pond—implying he was enjoying nature—but in the corner of the picture a man and

[229] Ibid.
[230] Charlie Boatner, message to author, May 26, 2014.

woman are lying down after what appears to be a picnic. Thus it is clear, the telescope could be used to spy on couples making out as well as nature.

Marvel Comics followed the guidelines of the CCA as to what ads they printed. While Nazi medals and weapons were off limits, tools to look at women in states of dress and undress caused little concern. Ads like these were featured in Marvel's most popular comics in the late 1970s while less popular titles featured more tantalizing fair for male voyeurism. For example, ads in titles like *Ghost Rider* showed a lot more of the female form in their advertisements in the late 1970s. For example, in issue #39 an advertisement showed Susan Somers with her cleavage bared and in a bathrobe. In the same ad, Cheryl Ladd and the Dallas Cowgirls flaunt themselves. Later issues would bring these images of women and integrate them into the comic books; however, the objectification that occurs most often focuses on Sue Richards.[231]

Male readers of *F.F.* adored the way Reed Richards was the patriarch of the family while Sue was to be seen and rarely heard. As a result, Sue's character had little outlet for change other than her appearance. Yet, it wasn't Sue's bosom that fans took note of in the early 1980s, as artists had not yet begun drawing women in such unrealistic proportions. Rather, fans focused on changes that artists rendered to her hair starting in 1982 when it was shortened and became close-cropped rather than the long flowing shoulder length hair she had worn before. Initially fans were outraged—they argued that it made her seem masculine—however, they warmed up as her hairstyle stayed short but became what they considered more feminine. For example, one fan argued "I still loathe with a passion the new hair style of Sue, but in the Roman sequence Flavius gives her a

[231] A classic 1978 *Saturday Night Live* skit (Season 4, Episode 7) of this era lampooned a show called *The Battle of the Network Stars* and instead calling it *The Battle of the T's and A's*.

new haircut that makes her look beautiful, more like a woman and less like Johnny. Keep her hair like that please."[232] The fan overlooks the fact that Flavius Scollio—an African villain who had captured alien armor that gave him special powers—intended to force Sue Richards to marry him and altered her appearance to suit his needs. In other words, if the underlying villainy of the character was a male's forcing their preconceived notions of femininity onto woman, then it was lost on this reader. Yet, Scollio's male chauvinism was not considered to be a major aspect of his villainy. Adding emphasis to this thought, Marvel responded flippantly in reference to Sue's ever changing hairstyle, writing "Sue still thinks it's a woman's prerogative to change her hair almost as often as she changes her mind."[233] Many fans wrote in to simply comment that they "like Sue's new hairstyle."[234] Intrinsic to the conversation is that the fans were not treated to any changes to Sue other than the physical. Sue's powers did not alter at all during the early 1980s, giving the impression that her appearance was the only thing that mattered about Sue Richards. As one fan said directly, "Her long beautiful blond hair **was one of her best features**, her crowning glory so to speak. And you chopped it off!!!! Thanks to you Sue looks like a man."[235] Once again we see fans focused on Sue's physical appearance and very concerned that she exude femininity. Soon fans were making the case that other women in the *Fantastic Four* needed to be enhanced as well. For example, one fan argued that Juliette D'Angelo—who was introduced in scantily clad outfit in *F.F.* #237—be given "a good going over, fix her hair, get her some contact lenses, have her put on a few pounds in all the right places."[236]

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[232] Michael Hopkins, "Fantastic Fan Page", *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 246, 1982.
[233] Ibid.
[234] "Fantastic Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 242, 1982.
[235] Brenda Robnett, "Fantastic Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 238, 1982.
[236] "Fantastic Fan Page", *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 260, 1983.

Editors were quick to chide the fan for his comments but it did not stop them from printing the letter. This allowed Marvel to judge reactions to male chauvinism and present themselves as not being chauvinistic themselves. Sue's hair had become such a focus for fan interest that in the following year a contest was held so fans could decide the hair style of both Storm—another female character that fans tended to objectify—and Sue Richards. Clearly, Marvel was willing to cater to the desires of their male fans. According to the ad announcing the contest that appeared in *F.F.* #260 "We were hoping Sue's Couture Contest might generate a little interest among our readers!"[237] The case can be made that Marvel was a voice for racial equality, however, it is clear that they fell flat in regards to gender equality. Even as late as 1987, in issue 299, fans were still commenting on Sue's hair in *Fantastic Four*'s fan page, the "Fantastic Forum." *Fantastic Four* may have made indirect use of the female form to entice readers but less popular comics, like *Ghost Rider*, were much more blatant often displaying women in various stages of undress. For example, in a 1978 issue of *Ghost Rider* #30, a woman is shown in her revealing nighty with her cleavage prominently on display. The content escalated quickly into sexual content with issue #64 which could be construed as a women having an orgasm.[238] The entire issue tosses around sexual innuendos that easily crossed the CCA's guidelines. For example, one character calls to a woman, "Come to Papa Spike you succulent sweetness."[239] The sexuality was not limited to men catcalling women either as Rzh'Arr, a demon dressed as Johnny's friend Cynthia Randolf, inquires in the same issue, "My, my Johnny Blaze you certainly are much the man. Can you give

[237] "Fantastic Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 263, 1983.
[238] *Ghost Rider*, Marvel Comics, 64, 1982, 5.
[239] Ibid, 7.

a girl a proper thank you?" After kissing Johnny, Rzh'Arr sticks her tongue out in a sexually provocative way. As early as the 1980s, *Ghost Rider* was establishing what would become a convention in comic books in the early 1990s— women drawn in costumes that revealed as much skin as possible. Although the CCA did not allow nudity, titles such as *Ghost Rider* that needed to attract readers often attempted to show as much of a woman's figure as was possible.

In contrast, issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* in the early 1980s tended to shy away from such content. Aside from a comic scene in issue #212 in which Hydro Man, a villain with the power to control water, ends up in the girl's shower (which without the narration could have depicted sexual violence), *The Amazing Spider-Man* kept away from what could cause Marvel problems in a popular title. Further, there were no outwardly exploitive outfits in *The Amazing Spider-Man* in the early 1980s. There were, however, plenty of female characters who postured and posed while Peter Parker, Spider-Man, watched. *Fantastic Four* also stayed away from showing too much skin. For example, in 1981, Frankie Raye—then-girlfriend of the Human Torch—is shown taking a shower. However artists are careful to only show the silhouette of her legs.[240] Again that does not mean that artist could not play with sexuality. For instance, in issue #237, Frankie Raye disrobes in front of her boyfriend, Johnny Storm. The sexual implication is obvious from the picture. Further, the narration teases the audience with possible sexual content in the next issue. Any males who desired that sort of material would be disappointed as it turns out Frankie had a giant computer attached to her, conveniently covering all her private areas. Playful content like this would be replaced by 1983, as even artists working on

[240] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 235, 1981.

popular titles like *The Amazing Spider-Man* began portraying women in a more sexually graphic manner.

Pornography and Marvel Comics

Part of the audience's ignoring of changes in the depiction of women in comic books was a result of the intense attention other media gave to the female form during the 1980s, partly as the result of new technology. The 1984 Supreme Court case, *Sony Corp. of America v. Universal City Studios, Inc.*, legalized the use of home video cassette (which had existed since the late 1970s). As the ability to watch potentially scandalous material became possible, Americans were provided a greater measure of privacy in regards to the films they viewed. As a result, the early 1980s were a boom time for the pornography industry. This created a great deal of concern among the public and even began to influence politics. For example, Edward Meese, the Attorney General under Ronald Reagan, listed pornography in his autobiography as a concern of the Reagan administration along with other New Right concerns, such as abortion, school prayer, busing, and coddling criminals. In fact, Meese had tried obscenity cases during the 1950s and was appalled at the level of "depravity" he saw in the 1980s. According to Meese, "I recognized that what I had prosecuted as 'obscenity' [in the 1950s] was now readily available at most airport bookstores. But even I was not prepared for the present depth of depravity, nor was President Reagan."[241]

Meese believed that dangerously overbroad liberal court decisions, including those that had legalized some forms of pornography, justified the Reagan administration's

[241] Edwin Meese, *With Reagan: The Inside Story* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1992), 312; ironically Reagan's own daughter, Patty Davis, posed for *Playboy* in 1993.

efforts to control judicial appointments.[242] The Reagan Administration was not alone in its concerns over the pornography industry. Radical feminists rallied against the pornography industry in the 1980s as well. According to the radical feminist view, "male dominated or patriarchal societies are hierarchically organized to expropriate women's sexuality for the use of males and that sexuality for women thus involves risks and abusive practices. Violence against women is maintained by the institutionalization of a dichotomy between dominant masculine roles and subordinate female roles."[243] These feminists focused on the harm pornography caused women, while the New Right focused on the damage pornography was thought to do to America's moral fabric and familial ties.[244] This uneasy alliance between the New Right and radical feminists ideological was an interesting consequence of concern over pornography's popularity in this era.

The New Right's disdain for pornography did not translate into a more egalitarian view of gender. For example, almost immediately upon election Ronald Reagan had "attempted to weaken sexual harassment prohibitions and reduce the effectiveness of the EEOC."[245] In fact, legislation regarding sexual harassment was so unpopular that it met resistance by women on the Right and men on the Left.[246] At the same time, many liberal feminists argued that pornography could be a liberating and "progressive cultural force."[247] In other words, although there was a great deal of attention given to pornography in the 1980s, it never translated into a unified, clear-cut argument against the objectification of women. Further, according to Edward Meese, "Pornography was

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[242] Meese, *With Reagan*, 316
[243] Ronald Berger, Patricia Searles, and Charles Cottle, "Feminism and Pornography," in *Women's Rights in the United States: A Documentary History,* edited by Winston Langley and Vivian Fox, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 316.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Baker, *The Women's Movement against Sexual Harassment*, 135.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Winston, 317.

not considered as much of a problem as street crime, drugs and other types of offenses," but he concluded that the Reagan administration saw the industry as a real threat.[248] The Reagan administration created an Obscenity Enforcement Unit (OEU) a part of the Criminal Division of the Justice Department.[249] The abundance pornography produced during the 1980s influenced the image of women in comic books as well as other media.

The emphasis on nudity or implied nudity in comic books became apparent by late 1982 as more and more women were drawn with their breasts overflowing their garments, clearly a way for Marvel to show as much skin as possible. By 1983, however, even the popularity of pornography was beginning to receive a receptive nod by the comic book industry. For example, in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #239 a woman is shown posing nude for a photo-shoot. Although only her bare back is exposed by the artists, it obvious that she is nude.[250] In an interesting example of how the comic book industry viewed the female form and women in general, issue #226 of the *F.F.* marked the debut of Charisma—a woman whose makeup made her capable of controlling men's minds. Clearly, the message that a woman's beauty was of paramount importance to both men and women, was not lost on readers during the 1980s. This message continued to escalate as sexual innuendos begin to appear even in popular titles. For example, in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #266 (1985) Peter Parker comments that his neighbor Bambi can "tingle my spider sense anytime." These juvenile references continued. In 1985, *The Amazing Spider-Man* consistently presented nude women. While they were always shown with their backs turned, it was an obvious flirtation with more provocative

[248] Meese, 313.
[249] Katherine Bishop, "Justice Dept. Team Leading Broad Effort on Obscenity," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1987.
[250] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 239, 1983, 10.

content. For example, in issue #267 two women are shown on a roof sun bathing topless as Spider-Man and the Human Torch fly past. The humor of these scenes revolve around the naked female form and masculine voyeurism. *Fantastic Four* #300 shows scene in which Alicia Master—girlfriend of Ben Grimm—and She-Hulk are secretly photographed as they change on Alicia's wedding day.[251] Thus, although the CCA kept Marvel Comics from presenting outright nudity, Marvel continued to push the boundaries of acceptability.

It is also clear, Marvel Comics had no issues with the way pornography presented women, and in fact, that Marvel Comics had strong ties to the porn industry.
Stan Lee and others at Marvel often worked with the pornography industry. For example, Michelle Urry, the cartoon editor for Playboy, was in contact with Stan Lee throughout the late 1970s. Lee pitched ideas to Playboy for erotic comics to be published in the magazines. Urry was also an accomplished comic book historian and pointed out to Lee, in her letter, what comics in the 1950s had done in order to create an erotic vibe.[252] In fact, she made suggestions with regards to which comic books Lee might look to in order to find acceptable content.[253] It is easy to ascertain from this correspondences that while Lee was attempting to make extra money through work at *Playboy* he was also being educated regarding what he and Marvel by proxy could get away with in comic books. Further, his erotic works proposed to *Playboy* incorporated blatant sexual violence. For example, both "Fearless Vivian in Trouble" and "Madam La Bondage" include almost gruesome images of sadism and masochism including sex toys, torture devices, and full

[251] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 300, 1987, 5.
[252] Douglas Martin, "Michelle Urry, 66, the Editor of Cartoons for Playboy, Dies," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2006; To Stan Lee and John Romita, Michelle Urry, *Playboy* Letterhead [Untitled], September 3, 1975. Stan Lee Archives, Box 5, Folder 9. SLP.
[253] Ibid.

frontal nudity. These articles were rejected by *Playboy* and never published because "Heff" (Hugh Hefner) thought they were too callous. Nonetheless, Lee continued to have strong ties with *Playboy* as did several other employees at Marvel. According to Danny Fingeroth, comic historian and former editor at Marvel, many employees at Marvel made money working with *Playboy* and *Penthouse* .[254] Lee also advised Trauma Entertainment in the creation of their marquee poster for their low budget "sexy comedy" *Squeeze Play!* The juvenile sexual innuendo is obvious in the poster. Lee eventually produced his own adult animated series, *Stripperella* in 2003, with the main character voiced by porn star Pamela Anderson. Clearly, those who worked at Marvel from 1978 to 1993 saw women as objects and that influenced their work. Marvel was not immune from changing gender standards however. By the early 1980s women were increasingly a common and respected sight in the work force. As a result, female characters had to evolve and became more like their male counterparts.

The Evolution of the Super-Heroine Body

In the 1980s, women had already proved that they could work successfully in professional positions once held exclusively by men. The assumption that women could move up the corporate ladder was also a reflection of the American belief in rugged individualism. The belief, however, ignored the fact that systematic sexism still existed in many places thereby making vertical social movement more difficult for women than men.[255] At the same time, American society began to fear the success of Second wave feminism. It was argued by conservatives that as women moved into the workplace, the domestic sphere, which had traditionally been the realm of women, was suffering. In

[254] Danny Fingeroth, email to author, 1/21/2014.
[255] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 89.

other words, some argued that by entering the workforce, women were jeopardizing their families and threatening traditional family values. Women who wanted to be successful workers were refraining from having children until after they had completed college. As a result, they were postponing marriage and children until they were in their late 20s or early 30s.[256] Statistics began to reflect this trend. For example, the fertility rate in America dropped from its high of 3.8 per household in 1957 to 1.8 in 1980—a fertility rate that could not keep up with the death rate.[257] Naturally, concerns over a woman's femininity began to seep their way into popular culture.

Films like *The Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), and *Robocop* (1987) all depicted women of the future as masculine tough-gals capable of competing with the ultra-masculine male characters depicted in the present such as *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon*. Even feminist rhetoric started to reflect a concern that woman had given up their femininity to compete with men. For example in *The Equality Trap,* Mary Ann Mason (an economist) argued that Second wave feminism had actually lowered women's station in America by setting unrealistic expectations of what a woman was capable of and forcing women to carry the full burden of household responsibilities. According to Mason:

> The crusade for equal rights both glorified the experience of work and gave women equal responsibility for supporting the family. Men were conveniently relieved of the sole responsibility for supporting the family at a time when it became impossible for them to do so. Meanwhile, the hard-fought right to abortion freed women to hold jobs; a women with four or five children has little energy left over for the marketplace.[258]

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[256] Suzanne Bianchi and Daphne Spain, *American Women in Transition* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1986), 40.
[257] Ibid., 82
[258] Mary Ann Mason, *The Equality Trap* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 25.

Mason argued that new position women found themselves in because of Second wave feminism put them at an economic and legal disadvantage compared to men. Even Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, one of the most influential books of Second wave feminism, modified her earlier argument that women should strive to make their way in a man's world. Instead, in 1981 she wrote *The Second Stage*, in which she called on women to embrace the family and reconnect to older constructs of femininity. She pointed out that women could not and should not be expected to be both a mother and successful worker on her own, but rather should be helped by men. According to Friedan, "The second stage involves coming to new terms with the family-new terms with love and with work. The second stage may not even be a women's movement. Men may be at the cutting edge of the second stage."[259] At the heart of these arguments lay a concern over the appropriate roles of women in society. Mainstream comic book companies—like Marvel—tended to comment on these concerns as well by producing manly female characters who embraced a masculine domineering role.

Prevalent in comic books of the Reagan-era is an underlying fear that women could compete equally with men. For example, Jean Grey became more powerful than any other X-Men when she was endowed with the power of the Phoenix. However, that same power made her mentally unstable and ultimately she committed suicide rather after destroying an entire planet. Perhaps even more insulting is Typhoid Mary, another of Daredevil's love interests. Her split personality embodying both the feminine standard of the 1950s and a professional hit-woman who hates men but is capable of competing equally with a male hit-man, reflected the prevailing dichotomous view of the role of

[259] Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 16.

women in society. The subtext is not very subtle. The fact that she was driven crazy by her struggle to reconcile the two competing aspects of her personality reflects the broader concerns that career women who also tried to be mothers could not be successful. Masculine women could be rehabilitated, these comics suggested, by having their femininity brought to the surface by ultra-masculine heroes. In other words, the masculine female could be saved by being dominated. In the case of Typhoid Mary, it was her love for Matt Murdock—Daredevil—that reforms her for at least an issue or two. For example, in *Daredevil* #297 (1991), "The Termination of Typhoid," Typhoid Mary's more feminine and therefore positive characteristics resurfaced only by having sex with Daredevil. The message of male dominance that appeared throughout Marvel's comic books during the 1980s fit well into the Reagan-era culture. Some fans did see through the thinly veiled guise and complained. For example, one fan explained his annoyance recurrence of strong female characters, in this case Typhoid Mary, as follows:

> I was appalled at seeing the latest storyline: "She has to kill him… she loves him." My first thought was, "great! Why don't they just bring Phoenix back again! There must be some other way to reincarnate Jean Grey!" My eyes read "Typhoid Mary," but my sarcastic little brain said: "ELEKTRA!" I let out a heavy sigh and plunked down my three quarters.
> It's different this time! Really…yeah, sure …good ol' Matt's getting himself in trouble with yet another killer lady. Is it my imagination or does everyone who tries to kill DD either fall in love with him or become obsessed?[260]

This letter was sent in 1988, after the peak of these more masculine characters in the early 1980s. It is easy to ascertain several things from the letter. One, fans were not oblivious to the number of more masculine and domineering female villains in comic book. Two, at least some fans were aware that the domineering female was controlled and in effect normalized through sexual relations with the male character. In other words,

[260] Gregory Lee, "Devil's Advocate," *Daredevil*, Marvel Comics, 259, 1988.

their femininity was reinforced because the male superhero was still able to dominate them sexually. This letter also reveals that not all fans were male chauvinists who readily bought into this line of thinking. That did not stop Marvel, however, from continuing to change the gendered characteristics of their characters. Instead they applied another tactic, making super-heroines more violent.

A year after Elektra's release, the X-Men faced their own masculine female in *X-Men* #170 from 1983. In the issue Angel—a male X-Man whose mutant abilities gave him wings—was bound and gagged by Calisto—a female character super-villain. Calisto, who had once been admired for her beauty, had lost her eye in an accident. Because she felt her femininity had been stripped, she went into seclusion and became a militant warrior. In order to compete with men, Calisto became extremely violent. As a result of the vicious female villain, Storm has to become more masculine and aggressive as well, yet Marvel was careful to protect Storm's sex appeal by downgrading the threat she posed. For example, in a brutal knife fight between Calisto and Storm, Storm's femininity was reasserted by having her clothes slowly shredded in the fight. This allowed Storm's more domineering and vicious nature to surface without upsetting readers. Three issues later, Storm permanently dons the masculine mantle by wearing a spike-leaden leather outfit and shaving her head into a Mohawk in order to be a more effective super-heroine for the 1980s (Clearly an allusion to punk styles and blatant sexuality of the day). The destructive force of her donning a more masculine stature is illustrated by Kitty Pride—a young protégé of Storm's—who runs away in tears when she sees Storm's new look. [261]

[261] *X-Men*, Marvel Comics, 170, 1983, 6.

In order for women to battle with men their femininity was often stripped. In *Fantastic Four* and other titles, feminine characters are replaced by larger more muscular masculine females such as the She-Hulk and Mrs. Marvel both of whom are blatantly antagonistic toward male characters. This shows a trend in complete contrast to the dawn of the 1980s when in *X-Men* #139, Jean Grey, who had proven herself to be more powerful than any of the male characters, committed suicide. She was replaced with the weak Kiddy Pride—a female teenager, who often acted as an object in need of protection in a manner similar to Sue Richards.

By the mid-1980s, women who could challenge men were no longer drawn in a masculine manner. Rather, their bodies were drawn in ultra-sexualized ways so that they could be shown as targets of sexual interest and their femininity could not be denied. Fans had derided Marvel when they showed the female form in a masculine manner and made clear they wanted the characters to exude femininity. As one fan states in his letter of praise for Sue Storm, "Sue was drawn nicely with femininity and athletic form. Too many times women are drawn with funny portions or too manly."[262] In the chauvinistic manner that marks Marvel Comics of this period, the editor's response was, "Paul Ryan likes it too. His wife gives him a hard time about the way he's been 'drawing' his female characters tastily-hubbahubba!"[263] In another example, The Incredible She-Hulk, who replaced Sue Richards, had been drawn fully clothed previously, but by 1985 sported a heaving bosom with her cleavage and the cusp of her breast exposed.[264] The more violent and dangerous a female character, the more her proportions were enhanced. This

[262] "Fantastic Forum," *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 371, 1992.
[263] Ibid.
[264] *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 296, 1986, 16.

was one way that Marvel could show more powerful women and integrate sexual content into their comics. Another option was through marriage.

Marriage

Fans expected marriage in the early 1980s to be reinforced and loathed anything that hinted at divorce. For example, although Sue and Reed never officially divorce, the team often disbands which was just a way that Reed and Sue could virtually divorce without raising the public's ire. Even these issues, were prone to irritate fans who expected, in the comic books at least, a marriages to last. One fan voiced his outrage at another breakup between Sue and Reed as follows: "Why don't you try something really different for 1978-*Fantastic Four* stay together the entire year! When was the last time that happened?"[265] Clearly, some fans were concerned with traditional family values attitudes that mirrored larger social concerns about changing family relations.

The concern over the birth rate and delayed parenting easily translated to the New Rights concerns over "traditional values," specifically the centrality of marriage. At the beginning of the 1980s, divorce was at a historic high, with three times the divorce rate in 1981 as compared to 1960.[266] The rising divorce rate in the early 1980s was used as proof of the weakening sense of family in the U.S. Such concerns were voiced in Marvel often in the 1980s. For example, in *Fantastic Four* issue #234 from 1981, Skip Collins—an everyman without any superpowers—is dominated by his overbearing wife Louisa. His inability to control his wife is a source of ridicule throughout the story. For example, the narration oozes sarcasm and sounds as if the man runs his household in a patriarchal fashion, similar to the 1950s, though it is clear this is not the case. The narrator describes

[265] Ann Nichols, "Baxter Building Bulletins," *Fantastic Four*, 1978, 198.
[266] Bianchi, 21

Skip's views on gender roles as such: "Sometimes rooted as he is in the perhaps antiquated role of the sexes he wishes Louisa would try to keep up with her 'wifely' chores." It is clear from the scene that the man's wife is slovenly and lazy. For instance, when he is going to work, she is still in bed.[267] In reality, the reader sees that his wife does nothing and uses him so that she can stay at home and watch television. Clearly, this particular issue embodies some of the feminist backlash the New Right tried to argue for in the early 1980s. This issue sets the standard post-feminist tone that characterizes *Fantastic Four* in the early 1980s. Two issues later, when Franklin is crying, it is Sue who is expected to get out of bed to check on him, while Reed stays in bed. This issue obviously emphasized marriage and the traditional roles of men and women. Although both of them work as superheroes, it is Sue's duty to get out of bed and take care of the children. This wholly conservative view of familial roles also hides the fact that this is the first time we see Reed and Sue together in bed. This sets a pattern in the comic books from the 1980s, marriage will be used to normalize content that hints at sex.

A pattern of implied sexual content began to emerge with the new emphasis on traditional family values. For example, in a 1983 issue of *F.F.* #254, sex between Sue and Reed was interrupted by a guard.[268] The fact that they are married is used to normalize the content by reemphasizing marriage norms. Fans caught on to the argument and based on the fan pages agreed. For example, one woman wrote that Sue "should use her feminine assets more imaginatively to enliven her marriage; no more lonely nights, without Reed for her! She should stimulate her husband persistently until he is

[267] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 234, 1981.
[268] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 254, 1983, 10.

overwhelming aroused."[269] In response the editors agreed with her statements wholeheartedly. This is not a plotline limited to *Fantastic Four*. For example, in issue #267 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the villain Ron is portrayed as much happier than Peter because his marriage is shown as an important part of a fulfilling lifestyle while Peter Parker's bachelorhood is mocked as a source of his misery. By *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue #284, under the direction of Todd McFarlane Spider-Man's love interest Mary Jane had physically morphed into a hyper-sexual figure with breasts the size of her head and endless "headlight scenes." In the same issue, emphasizing an archaic gender standard, Mary Jane props Peter's feet up and makes him dinner.[270] McFarlane continued to draw Mary Jane in a hyper-sexualized fashion. As a result, Marvel needed to normalize the escalating sexual content. They did so by having Mary Jane and Peter Parker get engaged six issues later in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #290. The marriage between Mary Jane and Peter Parker accelerated the objectification of Mary Jane (MJ). For example, in issue #300 MJ wears a negligée. In the same issue, MJ sheds her shirt off-panel while wearing a short skirt and fishnet hose and asks, "How about taking some snaps for our private collection." If the content wasn't sexual enough the narrator adds a juvenile innuendo, "Slowly Peter's spirit begins to rise."[271]

Marvel often used marriage as a way to normalize sexual content within the comics, however, that does not mean Marvel always showed marriage in a positive light. By the late 1980s, after sexual context was a norm in comic books, marriage was presented as a trap in which men are seduced by hyper-sexualized women. Petro—a

[269] Linda Mann, *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 229, 1981.
[270] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 284, 1987, 27.
[271] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 300, 1988, 17.

superhero known as Quicksilver—chastises his wife, Crystal, in F.F. #305 by referring to her as, "The woman who seduced my purity with the errors of the flesh." However, by this time female characters were able to defend themselves to a degree as Crystal retorts, "Oh, shut up. I can't claim to have been a good wife to you, but any errors I made were ones you drove me to with your self-righteous indifference to me and our daughter."[272] Eventually, the two's marriage would be annulled. While promoting marriage in the early 1980s, Marvel Comics and the public at large began to be more accepting of women's rights, even a woman's right to end a marriage.

Though slow moving, comic books during the late 1980s begrudgingly and intermittently moved toward a more gender equal view of marriage. For example, in 1987, *Fantastic Four* moved away from the expectation that Sue as the mother of Franklin was the sole person responsible for his well-being. As Ben Grimm noted, "It's about time Reed and Sue start devotin' more time ta their kid."[273] Spider-Man made a few token gestures as well. As he explained to another female superhero, "Look, friend, I've got no beef with you. This is 1980, not 1950."[274] However, while comic books were giving small concessions, they were also taking large liberties.

Recreating the Superheroine Body 1988-1993

The way the depiction of the female form changed in comic books foreshadowed the changes made to the CCA in 1989. Indeed, the majority of the changes made to the guidelines focused on "costume" and "adult relationships." Even in the 1971 revisions the standards of superheroes bodies remained almost identical to the 1954 regulations.

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[272] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 305, 1987, 2.
[273] Ibid.
[274] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 228, 1982.

By 1989, however the CCA regulations moved from providing specific examples to much more generic guidelines as to how superheroes were to be drawn. For example, the 1989 version stated that if the audience would accept the content then it would pass. According to the code costumes would be "acceptable if they fall within the scope of contemporary styles and fashions," while adult relationships could be "presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience."[275]

In other words, the 1989 CCA guidelines no longer held a standard with lofty goals for comic books to achieve; rather they had become a way to legitimize content in comic books that reflected what society would considered acceptable at a time when sexuality and violence was becoming a normal part of American culture. Further, masculine women were no longer a threat to males because of their bodies. By 1988, this convention, began to affect feminine characters. For example, under Todd McFarlane, the artist previously mentioned for ultraviolent content beginning in the late 1980s, MJ became a model and posed in "shape" magazine. This gave McFarlane an excuse to pose her naked and to otherwise highlight her hyper-sexualized body. Her objectification was so flagrant that from issue #300 to #307 Mary Jane is continuously on display. In 1989, Mary Jane, is shown working out to Jane Fonda tapes with her body provocatively displayed.[276]

At the same time, many female characters began to drawn in a position referred to as the pin-up pose—a full page drawing of the character that focused on female bodies. For example, *F.F.* issue #371 featured a full figure view of Sue Storm displaying her new

[275] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 2316.
[276] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 1989, 320, 13.

costume. In the same issue, Ms. Marvel, who was once an independent masculine woman voluntarily displays herself as well. Her comments chide the other male characters: "Hope you like my new costume. You didn't honestly think I was going to patiently wait by my phone—while you're risking your stupid macho necks?"[277] Yet her provocative pose totally removes the impact of her statement thereby making it seem flirtatious rather than chiding. This trend toward pinup-style posings reached its peak in 1992 when Marvel released its swimsuit issue playing off the enormously popular *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit editions.

When asked about the provocative sexual characteristics, Stan Lee downplayed the material, although he admitted that fan desires were the motivating factor. According to Lee, "It's just a case that the publishers always felt that predominately comics are read by boys; boys like to look at drawing of voluptuous girls, so they took that liberty." When pressed whether he thought that it was a good message to send boys, he answered: "Nah, I don't think it's any message at all. I don't think kids think that people fight in bikinis." As an afterthought he said, "I think it's very stupid [for female characters to wear a thong]."[278] It is difficult to take Lee's argument seriously. Aside from the stories that Marvel had produced under his direction and his comments about the female form mentioned earlier, Lee did not take equality seriously when it came to women.

A Female Peer Responds

Marvel's comics were intended to voice a conservative masculine tone. Though they had made some headway toward equality by the late 1980s, they had a history of deriding the women's movement. For example, Wright states that, "writers seemed to

[277] *Fantastic Four,* Marvel Comics, 371, 1992, 9.
[278] McLaughlin, *Conversations*, 192.

regard 'women's lib' with the same bemusement and dismissiveness that others in the media did. Characters like Thundra and the Man-Killer were caricatures of feminists, who despised all men."[279] The objectification of women in Marvel's comics, however, did not always go unchallenged. In the mid-1980s some women in the comic book industry challenged Marvel's representation of female characters. This led in the early 1980s to an interesting exchange between Marvel and artist and comic historian Carol Strickland. In her first letter to the Fantastic Forum, which appeared in the March 1980 edition, Strickland stated:

> Hooray! What with her collapse in *Fantastic Four* #212 it would appear as if Susan Richards is finally going to be killed off. I would have thought that such an event would have occurred about ten years ago, when she first outlived her usefulness and outdated characterization. Susan has been the ultimate stereotype, the token female there to scream, faint, worry get in the way, get captured and to be the romantic interest not only for another member of the group but for the villains. While Marvel is able to create and maintain such strong characters as Ms. Marvel , Black Widow, Medusa, Tigre, the new Scarlet Witch, and all the women of the X-Men, Susan Richards has been an insult to your readers.[280]

Other fans noted the change in Sue Storm the occurred in 1983-1984, when other female characters were increasingly embracing the more masculine and dominant attitude. According to one fan, "I felt obliged to drop a quick note of congratulations on your treatment of Sue Richards. I've cordially detested the invisible wimp for the better part of twenty years, but I have to admit that your portrayal of her has completely revived my opinion. She's full functioning not the cry baby she was for the first hundred issues or so… [at the same time] she's not degenerated into one of those relentlessly macho women that is so in vogue." The letter concludes with a comment about the editor seeing

[279] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 250.
[280] Carol Strickland, "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 216, 1980.

himself as a "sexist pig," a rejection of the way Marvel often tried to deflect criticism by painting themselves as helpless victims of feminist rants and irrational demands. [281] Other fan letters Marvel printed reflect upon the anger some women felt over Sue Richards being referred to as the Invisible Girl instead of the Invisible Woman. At least one female fan came to Marvel's aid arguing,

> The difference between a girl and a woman is more than a matter of simple age, it's a difference in attitude. Girls follow the rules of the traditional double standard-women create their own standard based on equal worth. In their appreciation of men, girls are coy while women are openly enthusiastic. Sue Richards, no matter what her age, is a girl. Patsy Walker [HellCat] is a woman. However, and this the important point, Sue has just as much right to be a girl as Patsy has to be a woman! The Marvel Universe didn't exchange one sweeping stereotype for another.[282]

In a later letter, Strickland reiterated her earlier point saying, "It is time for Susan Storm Richards to come to a crisis point. Personally I'd love to see her make a New Year's resolution to assert herself and use the powers she's been given."[283] Once again Marvel found or created a letter in response.[284] In which the author states, "any good husband should prepare his wife for his absence."[285] The letter therefore seems to agree with Strickland to a point, but still implies that women need to be taught by men how to be independent.

Aside from fan mail, Marvel also used the representation of Sue Storm to paint feminists as immoral and attention seeking. They did this through several stories, but

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[281] "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 242, 1982.
[282] Linda Mann, "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 229, 1981.
[283] "Fantastic Four Fan Page," *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 1980, 221.
[284] Danny Fingeroth, one-time-editor at Marvel Comics who had been in charge of the letter columns notes that it was not unusual for Marvel to create its own letters to fill the letter column thus allowing them to push forward their own agenda. Further he notes that the more positive letters were printed, with the occasional negative letter tossed in for the appearance of objectivity. Therefore when looking at letters printed by Marvel it is clear that they contained letters wanted the public to see because they carried the message Marvel wanted the public to know; Danny Fingeroth, email to author, August 21, 2013.
[285] Ibid.

perhaps none so effectively as *F.F.* #245, "Childhood's End." In this comic, Sue is interviewed by Barbra Walker—a clear Barbra Walters parody. When Walker points out how often Sue has been used as bait and is considered the weakest member of the team, Sue sits back demurely and thinks to herself, "Think what you want Barbara I've got nothing to be ashamed of."[286] In the same comic Sue ends up saving the rest of *Fantastic Four* from Franklin by reasserting her power as Franklin's mother, **not** by using her powers. Even this bit of wiggle room, mostly used to reinforce traditional values and assuage criticism of Sue's portrayal, was rebuked and within just a few issues Sue was back to her meek subservient role. Marvel justified her subservience by having her suffer a miscarriage in *F.F.* #268 because of her powers. This storyline mirrored ideas in conservative rhetoric that argued women could not be both mothers and successful career women. According to this view, women either had to sacrifice their femininity and become more masculine foregoing children all together or they could let their children suffer for the sake of their career. In the next issue, Reed pushes Sue to the side and will not allow her to join the mission. In many episodes afterward, she is also left behind, in order to highlight her weakness. Sue initially rallies against her treatment by Reed. She thinks to herself, "He's wrong. I'm not a doll. I'm every bit as important a part of this team as Reed or Johnny or Ben…or She-Hulk. I won't be pushed to the background again." Yet only two issues later she accepts her loss in the team as fate, not something she can fight with.[287] The argument Marvel put forward echoed what many post-Feminist conservative critics were arguing. As Dow sums up, "For backlashers, women's liberation was a mistake for women and for everyone else. Women's denial of traditional

[286] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 245, 1982, 5.
[287] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 270, 1984, 8.

roles and their increased freedom to choose motherhood have made them miserable and have weakened the family."[288] This is the same argument that seems to be reflected in the majority of Marvel's comics and allowed Marvel to reinforce the period's norms.

In the late 1980s, sexualized content in comics became more graphic and occasionally implied violence. Sexual violence and representations of sex in general were not allowed in CCA authorized comic books even after the 1989 revisions but the implication of sex including sexual assault were permissible. Once again, Marvel set the tone for what was acceptable while the CCA's reaction was an afterthought. In a 1987 story Ms. Marvel was the victim of sexual assault. After she was attacked, Ms. Marvel refused contact with men. Her fear of men was such a hindrance that she put her partners in jeopardy. For instance, in issue #308 of the *F.F.* she refuses to grab Johnny Strom's hand to stop him from falling because she could not touch men.[289] Ironically, in the same issue Ms. Marvel's sexual nature is highlighted as her cleavage and bare bottom are shown. This was not limited to images of the F.F. For example, in another suggestion of rape, *Ghost Rider* issue #5, the narration makes clear a woman has been the victim of sexual assault, yet the suggestion is never made explicit. [290] Even *The Amazing Spider-Man* included the implication of rape starting in 1988 when Mary Jane was kidnapped by Jonathan Ceasar—a rich villain obsessed with her—who he tells. He tells her "I built this room for you and swept you away to be my bride. It was all great deal of trouble true, but, that will just serve to sweeten—our **Wedding Night!**"[291] Thus by the late 1980s it is clear that a change in the perception of women was occurring at Marvel. Women could

[288] Dow, 93
[289] *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics, 308, 1987, 11
[290] *Ghost Rider*, Marvel Comics, 5, 1990, 1.
[291] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 309, 1988, 9.

be easily rendered in scenes of violence (perhaps even indicating sexual violence). Perhaps to make up for the content that was blazing a trail for the CCA to follow Marvel also seemed to be making minor concessions to women as well.

By the late 1980s, women could be strong and maintain their femininity. For example, in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1986), issue #276, Flash—a professional athlete and friend of Peter Parker—yells at his girlfriend while she is in a hospital bed. In response to Flash's behavior and as a way to emphasis her disdain she slaps him in the same backhand fashion that had previously been reserved for women. She is a normal character without any super-powers and illustrates the movement toward gender equality. At the same time, women no longer had to be masculine in order to normalize their violent behavior. By 1987, even the extremely demure and vivacious Mary Jane is capable of graphic violence. For example, enraged over Peter's absence she brutally beats a rat to a bloody pulp.[292] In *Ghost Rider* as well, normal-figured women were capable of demonstrating the same athleticism and power as their more muscular male counterparts. For example, in *Ghost Rider* #8, HEART—an all women group of villains—attack Ghost Rider in a direct physical confrontation. In the very next issue, a girl uses judo to take down her male attacker. As if to add seriousness to the spirit of gender equality, in *Ghost Rider* issue #15 when a male character comments, "They're just women," he's quickly subdued by women. In some ways then, women in comics had made incremental progress toward gender equality by the 1990s, in that they were more often engaged in direct confrontations with males instead of attacking from a distance. Cracks were beginning to show in the conservative nature of comic books which

[292] *Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 293, 1987.

translated to more opportunities for another group that had been mistreated by comic book companies, homosexuals.

Homosexuality in Comics 1989-1993

After the revisions to the CCA in 1989, homosexuality was no longer banned from comic books that carried the CCA's "seal of approval." Perhaps as a way of courting homosexual readers the objectification of super-hero bodies was no longer focused strictly on women. For example, in the late 1980s, Peter Parker is often shown in his underwear or naked and in the shower.[293] In a blatantly homoerotic scene in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue #317, Spider-Man rips off his clothes and says to Venom "You want me? Take me, I'm yours."[294] Then both men costumes are stripped from them and they appear in their underwear. This trend hits its peak in 1992, when Marvel produced a swimsuit edition in which several renderings clearly have a homoerotic quality.[295] The increasing focus given to male superhero bodies was thus another attempt by Marvel Comics to expand their market share. It is therefore no coincidence that in the same year as the swimsuit edition, Marvel introduced the first mainstream homosexual character—Sunspot. Marvel's attempts, however, were as transparent and ineffectual as the tactics they had tried to secure more females readers.

Marvel followed a larger trend in the media to court homosexuals. Beginning in the early 1980s and becoming more blatant in the 1990s, television executives had found that by aiming their products at homosexuals, they opened another extremely lucrative

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[293] For further discussion of marketing in the 80s and early 90s targeted at homosexuals see also Sinari Glinton, *Advertisers Come Out Of The Closet, Openly Courting Gay Consumers*, available at http://www.npr.org/2014/06/29/326524942/advertisers-come-out-of-the-closet-openly-courting-gay-consumers

[294] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Comics, 317, 1989, 29.

[295] Richard Cook, *Superheroes in Speedos*, available at http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2011/01/superheroes-in-speedos/

market.[296] In fact by the early 1990s, companies like K-mart and Johnny Walker were courting homosexuals with "ambiguous ads." [297] Considering this, it does not seem that Marvel Comics—with its unending search for a greater market—would be beyond doing the same thing and it is clear from the storylines and depictions that, at least on some level, Marvel used Peter Parker as a sex object to lure homosexual readers.

Comic books from 1978 to 1993 increasingly emphasized superhero sexuality (initially in females characters but by the early 1990s in male characters as well) for a variety of reasons. Marvel Comics focused on the female form and used it to sell comic books to young males. At the same time, Marvel had strong connections to *Playboy* and other pornographic magazines that influenced their depictions of women. Though this trend started with women, it soon spread to the male superheroes with an emphasis of attracting more homosexual and female readers. Yet even though comic books became more sexualized during this period, the public had much larger concerns regarding the objectification of bodies. Because recent changes in technology allowed for the saturation of the media with graphic sexual content, illustrations in comic books seemed quite tame by comparison. Furthermore, as feminists, who were the most likely to notice the changes in depictions of females, suffered from a backlash against feminism in the early 1980s, they focused less attention on women in comics. In addition, the growing schism within feminism regarding sex also reduced the unity of their cultural critique and helped comic books escape the public's ire. Finally, the CCA by 1989 had lost much of its influence on the market place. As a result, comic book companies were willing to

[296] Ron Becker, *Prime-Time Television in the Gay '90s: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics, in Connections: A Broadcast History* (Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth, 2003), 326.
[297] Ibid., 330.

produce comic books without the "Seal of Approval." In order to remain viable the CCA went from being a restraining hand in the comic book industry to an authority that the comic book industry could hide behind.

The ramifications of Marvel's decisions regarding the way they attempted to court female and homosexual readers would have a major impact on Marvel's future. In the mid-1990s, Marvel would once again find itself in a financial bind, at one point filling Chapter 11 bankruptcy. As a result they spent the late 1990s frantically looking for sources of new income. Their courtship of homosexual readers would prove to be fairly successful and did not put-off their established readers who tended to be accepting of homosexual characters in comic books. However, when Marvel came calling, women readers opted for a different style of comic book which they found less offensive than the male chauvinism expressed in mainstream comics.

Conclusion: Do Comic Books have a Future?, 1993-Present

A review of the treatment of race, gender, and violence in post-1980s reveals a broadening acceptance of violence, but also increasing devotion to topical content such as homosexual rights and the place of women. Comic books in the early 1980s tackled such issues in a slow, incremental fashion touching on issues of racism even while broadening its objectification of women and expanding the level of violence. At the same time, the American public had grown accustomed to a new style of media due, at least in part, to the emphasis on deregulation by the Reagan administration. This deregulation had unexpected consequences including the escalation of violence and sex in mainstream media, but may also have influenced the progressive media that focused on issues of race and sexuality. The public developed a taste for such content and quickly grew tired of any media that did not challenge the status quo. In this maelstrom of media changes, comic books, following an incremental and careful pace, made it through a conservative era without creating another public outcry that might have caused another economic collapse. That did not guarantee the future of comics, however, as these changes would have important ramifications. The continuing objectification of women in comics cost Marvel the support of women, who as it turned out were actually interested in comic books, just not comic books that portrayed women the way Marvel did. At the same time, Marvel continued to preach tolerance by escalating the frequency with which it commented on bigotry through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, yet minority groups still just did not seem interested in comic books. The tolerance for sensational media content in the 1980s allowed comics to challenge the CCA's guidelines; however, with that expansion of sensational content, which reached its peak in the early 1990s, there

was also the expectation that comic books would be able to continue to compete but they simply could not.

In an effort to increase sales, during the Reagan-era comics companies created comic books that became increasingly violent, women super-heroines became more and more busty, and homosexuality was no longer a taboo subject for discussion. In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union coupled with the election of Democratic Bill Clinton after a decade of Republican Party rule signaled a shift in America away from a conservative era toward a more liberal age. In 1993, as Americans entered a renewed period of liberalism and the Clintons settled into the White House, comic books became a billion-dollar-a-year industry.[298] The sensational tone of comics had brought older fans back and new readers to comic books. With a bit of historical perspective some journalists began to realize the importance of what had happened in comic books. For example in 2004, Jordan Isamu reported for the *Spokesman Review* that during the height of the comic book boom in 1993 Marvel and DC "broke Batman's back, cloned Spider-Man and killed Superman, and they did it with alternative covers, glow-in-the-dark covers, holograms covers, etc."[299] The push towards sensationalism reached its peak in 1993 with the "Death of Superman," which brought a great deal of interest to comic books. New companies like *Image Comics* produced comics that defied expectations of violence and sexuality because they did not follow the CCA guidelines. New comics produced by companies like Image along with sensational comics produced by established companies like DC enjoyed one of the biggest booms in the history of comics

[298] Jordan Isamu, "Bat's all, Folks; Comics-based Films Thriving, but there hasn't; been a comic Sales Boom Since 'Batman,'" *Spokesman Review*, May 01, 2003, D1.
[299] Ibid.

as many people hurried to the comic book shop to pick up first editions of new and extremely popular characters. Collectors bought these comics because they were convinced they would be a good investment. Comic book enthusiasts bought them because they were important milestones in their character's story arc. Both fans and collectors, unfortunately, neglected to realize that DC Comics could not afford to permanently kill off its most popular character. At the same time, other characters also went through drastic changes as Hal Jordan the original Green Lantern went insane, Batman was paralyzed, and Mary Jane became pregnant with a child that did not belong to Peter Parker. Short term sensationalism was partly responsible for driving the market. The market was so saturated with comic books that even though short term speculation saw collectors paying enormous sums money for 1st editions; however, they were not viable long term investments and the bottom dropped out of the comic book market beginning with the return of Superman. Those collectors who tried to "cash out," by selling Superman #75, found that they were lucky to get the cover price. [300]

Ironically, just as it had in 1954, comic books suffered tremendously after a period of massive expansion that was due in large part to its willingness to create sensational work that had startling levels of violence and sexuality. However, unlike the collapse that occurred after 1954 when sensationalism had been cut short by cultural watchdogs, the comic book industry used other media to guide them being careful to present content that was a watered down by comparison. Therefore, those in the comic book industry were able to push sensational content, but did not suffer from any sort of public backlash. Instead, comic books suffered for not keeping the content in comics real

[300] Chuck Rozanski. "Death of Superman Promotion of 1992." Available at http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg127.html

enough since both fans and collectors wanted permanence for their characters and the "return" of any character met with public scorn.

In January, 1994, the comic book bubble burst and over 1,000 comic book shops went out of business. By the turn of the 21st century, sales had lapsed to $275 million annually (from a high of over $1 billion annually) and only a third of comic book stores that had lived through the boom years of 1993 survived.[301] In 2001, as the comic book industry struggled to survive, Marvel comics abandoned the Comics Code Authority entirely in favor of its own rating system. Yet, Marvel and the comic book industry as a whole had not suffered any widespread public backlash as a result of its content. So what explains the collapse of the market and how did Marvel Comics cope with it?

The aftermath of the collapse was a trying time for Marvel which was forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1996. As it emerged from bankruptcy, it struggled to regain economic stability through various gimmicks. For example, in 1996, Marvel teamed up with its longtime rival, DC Comics, creating a large continuous crossover between its characters and those in the DC universe, something Marvel had only done once before in a one-shot comic—*Superman vs. The Amazing Spider-Man* (1976).[302] Still the problem persisted in no small part due the public's chagrin over being duped. By 2002, the market was so poor that *Batman,* the top-selling book in March sold a disappointing 122,000 copies, while *Ultimate Spider-Man* was second best with a mere 100,000 in sales. These levels of circulation were far below what would have led to their cancellation in the 1980s.[303] Marvel began to diversify its approach to selling comics

[301] Aravind Adiga, "Man of Steel no Match for Teen Apathy: Comic Books in Decline." *National Post*, October 18, 2000, 2.
[302] John Layman, Comic Heroes Fight Back: Publishers making Fantastic Forays in Effort to Recapture Fan," *The San Diego Union – Tribune*, July 4, 1996.
[303] Isamu, D1; Remember that under McFarlane in the late 1980s and early 1990s sales had topped out around 800,000.

frantically searching for a panacea to its economic woes. They tried several drastic marketing ploys including "Free Comic Book Day," a day on which major publishers distributed comic either free or for a drastically reduced price.[304] Their broad-based strategy also included an attempt to find a wider audience and so once again Marvel attempted to court female viewers.

Marvel's efforts to gain women readers in the past were, more often than not, offensive and halfhearted measures that did more to antagonize women than to actually court them as viewers. Among their major mistakes was that even when creating stories that focused on female characters, Marvel rarely hired female writers. David Gabriel, the senior vice president of sales and circulation at Marvel, admitted that in the 1980s Marvel had not really put forth a good-faith effort to attract women readers or creators. In fact, it seemed as though Marvel thought that any concessions towards female readers, such as creating a female character, should have been enough to satisfy women. According to Gabriel, "Before, the thought was, if you do 'She-Hulk,' that will attract girls."[305] At the same time, chauvinism of the long standing boys-club mentality of the comic book industry has come increasingly under attack.

Women comic book enthusiasts over the past several decades have increasingly voiced their views that comics need to be gender inclusive. In 1999, the website "Women in Refrigerators" (WiR), was developed by a group of comic book fans so that the public could openly discuss why women were disproportionately passive victims of violence in comics, catalogue examples, and discuss the implications of such violence—

[304] Ibid.
[305] Matt Phillips, "Pow! Romance! Comics Court Girls; Inspired by Japanese Manga, Major American Publishers Aim for new Female Fans," *Wall Street Journal*, June 08, 2007, B1.

especially as a plot device for male characters to take action. The website's name was coined by Gail Simone based on a 1994 *Green Lantern* #54 in which the main character's (Kyle Rayner) girlfriend was killed and stuffed in a refrigerator. Women readers became increasingly disinclined to ignore this sort of content. Women, who were aggravated over the lack of a true female presence in the industry, noted that in 2011 less than one percent of artists at DC were women. Awareness of such facts caused many potential female buyers to take a more aggressive stance than they had in previous years toward publishers. Over 4,500 fans signed a petition that warned DC Comics to hire more female staff members or 'you will only continue to see your sales numbers plummet."[306] Comic book bloggers such as Vanessa Gabriel realized that DC and Marvel had been slow to do more than "pay lip service to female readers," and commented that, "I think there has been a formula that may have worked in the past for Marvel and DC, and clearly it is not working anymore."[307] Other bloggers like Laura Hudson, felt American comics "range from comics where women are sexualized to comics where they are really, really sexualized."[308] Female fans, who Marvel had always considered less inclined to buy comics, proved to be very interested in comics, they were simply not interested in reading comics that portrayed them as beautiful bimbos. Manga comics, a Japanese style of comic book, filled this vacuum.

Manga comics, found a ready audience of women between the ages of 13 to 33 in the late 21st century.[309] Manga has been successful because it stood in stark contrast to

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[306] Ben Quinn, "Ker-pow! Women Kick Back Against Comic-Book Sexism: Women are Sidelined at Big Comic Book Publishers and Sexually Harassed at Conventions, but a British-made, Female-Driven Anthology Heralds a Cultural Shift that may Change all that," *The Guardian*, December 29, 2011, 10.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Laura Pate, "Magna-what?" *St. Joseph News – Press*, April 10, 2005.

the American style comic books that emphasized women with busts of impossible proportions. According to Nicole Lewis, a 19-year-old university sophomore and manga fan, "Female characters in manga tend to be less voluptuous than the superwomen in U.S. comics. Such curvaceous characters can be tough for young women to relate to."[310] Further, Manga comics are willing to engage in plot devices that might turn off some male readers. For example, although action and sexual content is prevalent in such comics, they also include scenes dedicated to "awkward silences, embarrassing moments and close-ups of tear-filled eyes."[311] Many of Marvel's rivals including companies like Dark Horse have sought to capitalize on the market thereby establishing themselves before larger companies like Marvel had an opportunity to do so.[312] For example, Dark Horse entered into a partnership with Harlequin Enterprises Limited of the famous Harlequin Romance novels to produce Harlequin's romance stories in a manga format. These comics are divided into a "pink" line for younger readers and a "violet" line for older readers thereby avoiding potential parental concerns over the content.[313] Their decision to court female readers proved to be fortuitous as the total market in 2006 for comics and graphic novels was $640 million with manga representing about one third of the market. Further in 2006, sales escalated to 9.5 million from 7.8 in 2005.[314] Marvel and DC are currently trying to establish themselves in the female comic book market, but because of their late start and perhaps their history of treating women less respectfully, they have met with less success than other companies. While it would be tempting to place all of the blame on Marvel for not putting enough effort into courting women

[310] Phillips, "Comics Court Girls," B1.
[311] Ibid.
[312] Isamu, "Bat's all folks," D1.
[313] "Dark Horse Comics to Publish Harlequin Novels in Manga Format,"*NewsWire*, June 1, 2005.
[314] Phillips, B1.

readers, it is far more interesting to consider whether their male readers share some of the blame as well.

Female manga readers buy their comics at major retail outlets like Barnes and Noble rather than the comic book shop where mainstream American comics are sold. This may indicate hesitation on the part of women to enter the mostly male domain of the local comic book shop which also stocks manga comics. The comic book shop is home to what has been referred to as "nerd" and "geek" culture. In some establishments it is a place where male chauvinism reigns.[315] Therefore, it is no coincidence that women are less willing to go to a comic book shop over a bookstore.[316] This has worked in favor of manga comics that are found in major book stores. As a result, the mainstream comic book industry has put itself in a bind by both engaging in and supporting a climate of chauvinism.

In contrast to the vexed relationship with feminism and women readers, Marvel Comics and comic book fans have been surprisingly accepting of homosexuality.[317] For instance, Marvel Comics's first homosexual character Northstar, a member of the X-Men who has been out since 1992, was married to his longtime companion Kyle Jinadu, in *Astonishing X-Men* #51, published June 27, 2012. In a recent interview with National Public Radio, Alex Alonso the current editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, stated that the reception of the wedding was mainly positive, but he added "whenever you do something that has a political or social component, you're going to hear from both sides of the issue or the battle lines."[318] It is worth noting that the market has changed so drastically that it

[315] Josh Huntsman, "Value of Cosplay more than Showing Skin," *The Spectrum*, August 11, 2013, 2.
[316] Quinn, 10.
[317] "Art Imitates Life in Same Sex Superhero Wedding," *Tell Me More*, National Public Radio, June 25, 2012.
[318] Ibid.

was the conservative Archie Comics that featured the first gay wedding in *Archie* issue # 16 between Kevin Keller and Clay Walker months before Northstar's wedding. Homosexual characters and even stories about latent homosexuality are now common in comic books. In fact, there seems to be what Raju Mudhar of the *Toronto Star* called a gay "arms race," between DC and Marvel. He discusses the large number of comic book characters, new and old, who are now openly gay. For example, he notes that Rick Jones—a sidekick of the Incredible Hulk—found out that his wife had a long term love affair with a woman while in college.[319] According to Michael Sangiacomo of the *Plain Dealer*, DC's *Enigma* was "all about repressed homosexuality."[320] These forays into content that discusses homosexuality don't appear to have hurt comic book companies, if anything, they have expanded their markets. Yet even such an expansion cannot be credited alone with saving Marvel. New approaches to racial subjects have also played an important role.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Marvel created, racially diverse characters that might appeal to minorities. In the 21st century, instead of creating new characters of various racial backgrounds Marvel instead began reimagining established characters as multiethnic. In the 2001 *Ultimate Team-Up Issue* # 5, previously white Nick Fury made his debut as an African American. The success of Fury's character, is in no small part due to the popularity of Samuel L. Jackson's portrayal of him in the films *Captain America*, the *Iron Man* series, and *The Avengers*, Kyle Puttkammer, owner of Galactic Quest comic stores in Georgia said "When Nick Fury was portrayed by Samuel L.

[319] Raju Mudhar, "DC Announces Gay Character as Marvel Plans Same-Sex Wedding," *The Star*, May 23, 2013, at http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2012/05/23/dc_announces_gay_character_as_marvel_plans_samesex_wedding.html

[320] Michael Sangiacomo, "Gay and Lesbian Superheroes Shed Cloaks," *The Plain Dealer*, September 03, 2002, E1.

Jackson, it seemed like a natural update."[321] The move with a third tier character proved so successful that Marvel expanded reimagining the Marvel Universe in a multiracial way. Peter Parker was killed-off and a new Spider-Man, Mike Morales a half-black half-Latino teenager, replaced him. Yet while Fury's alteration flew under the public's radar, as most of the population did not know he was originally white and were aware of Fury only through Jackson's portrayal of him in the movies, the changes to a popular character like Spider-Man got the public's attention. Media carnage ensued after the new Spider-Man hit newsstands. The change proved so startling to the public it was discussed on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Conan,* and the *Colbert Report*.[322] Among the general public the news was received with mixed results. Some critics were offended that Marvel had not gone to the effort to produce an original character. For example, *iReporter* Omekongo Dibinga wrote, "I want more people of color in the comic book word but I believe that new characters should be made with their own stories. I never wished for a black Wolverine or Cyclops. Conversely, I don't want to see a white Storm character. I just wanted characters like Bishop, Sunfire, and Sunspot and others that represented different backgrounds."[323] On the other hand, more conservative views ranged from paranoid to offensive. For instance, *Fox News* wondered whether this indicated "a radical left turn," Gary Stein of the *Sun Sentinel* questioned whether it was "PC run amok," a message board at *The Root* called the new multiracial Spider-Man the "colored Spidey,"and a *USA Today* message board member called it "super hero affirmative action."[324] Nonetheless, by and large, Marvel comic book fans accepted it as a

[321] Henry Hanks, "Are Comics becoming more Diverse?" *St. Joseph News-Press*, September 7, 2011.
[322] Ibid.
[323] Ibid.
[324] Leonard Pitts, "Spider-Man Dives into a Changing America," *Detroit Free Press*, August 12, 2011, A14.

progressive move. According to the *New York Daily News* the new Spider-Man "is making a big splash among New York superhero buffs."[325] Further they reported that comic book fans "were thrilled to see a biracial superhero."[326] The news coverage led to a desperately needed momentary upsurge in sales. It was apathy, not outrage, that Marvel feared most, and the only way for Marvel Comics to stay in business was through integrating itself into other media, rather than trying to compete with them.

The key to this integration was the growing violence in comics in the 1980s that attracted the attention of Hollywood. Film studios produced an updated rendition of Batman with hard edged style that was much more appealing to violence craving audiences. *Batman* (Warner Brothers) grossed $250 million in 1989 leading to a Batman renaissance including a huge marketing campaign by Warner Brothers.[327] Marvel obviously wanted to take part and create a "renaissance" of its own, but legal issues had prevented Marvel from producing high quality films such as *Batman* in the 1980s. Instead they were forced to produce independent films which often used violent content instead of a quality story line. For example, in 1989 action star Dolph Lundgren starred in *The Punisher*. The film was horrifically violent, ending with the villainess, Lady Tanaka, being stabbed in the head. Poorly made and too violent for most movie theaters, the film went directly to video in the United States. Other films such as The *Fantastic Four* (1994), were notoriously bad, so poorly made that it was never released. In the mid-1990s when Marvel was on the brink of financial collapse they sold the film rights to several of their characters. Sony Pictures bought the rights to Spider-Man and Twentieth

[325] Edgar Sandoval, "Half Black, Half Latino, and all Spider-Man," *New York Daily News*, August 5, 2011, 27.
[326] Ibid.
[327] Isamu, D1.

Century Fox acquired the X-Men and Fantastic Four."[328] As a result of its poor finances, Marvel was only able to negotiate rights to 5% of the revenue generated by the films.[329]

When Marvel emerged from bankruptcy, it finally managed to produce a major motion picture, but because it had been forced to sell the film rights to its more prominent characters, their first big budget film was based on a lesser known, but exceptionally violent character, named Blade. Following in the footsteps of *The Punisher*, *Blade* (1998) proved to be a graphic film (in one scene, Blade played by Wesley Snipes, swims through a pool of blood). It was nonetheless, a major success and paved the way for more high profile films with larger budgets like the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* films. During these lean times Marvel battled low circulation and survived, but obviously did not thrive on the 5% it made off of its films.[330] As the *Chicago SunTimes* remarked at the time, "Marvel can see the signs and doesn't need a "Bat-signal" to do it.[331] The future for Marvel was clearly in films; the "renaissance" in readership that occurred after the *Batman* films, never emerged for Marvel. As the *Spokesman Review* noted, "Comics-based films make up one of Hollywood's hottest genres while comic book sales have chilled."[332]

Realizing the survival of Marvel rested on its ability to transfer more fully into other media, Marvel began to produce its own movies starting in 2005. Proceeds from *Iron Man*, *Thor*, and *Captain America* went directly to Marvel. As a result of their success, they were bought by the Walt Disney Corporation for $4 billion in 2009.[333] With

[328] Ben Fritz, "Why Can't Marvel's Movie Superheroes be Friends?; A Web of Conflicting Deals Prevent Them from Working Together," *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2014.
[329] Ibid.; Marvel has sold off these specific films while it retained rights to others.
[330] Adiga.
[331] "Superheroes who are Super at the Box Office," *Chicago Sun – Times*, April 28, 2002, 13.
[332] Isamu, "Bat's all Folks, " D1.
[333] Fritz, "Why Can't Marvel's Movie Superheroes be Friends?"

new resources, Marvel produced the *Avengers* which went on to earn over $1.5 billion in tickets sales globally.[334] Currently, Marvel's legacy rests on their viability at the box office film where "they have been among the top five movies at the box-office for seven of the past 10 years."[335] Marvel has benefited from its association with Disney and its financial backing has led to numerous films for which they receive larger compensation, several animated films, and a popular television show, *Marvel's Agents of SHIELD*. The power and financial backing of Walt Disney has its perks. Disney has hired Joss Whedon, currently one of the most popular directors of science fiction film and television, to write the scripts. Further, as the parent company of ABC, Disney had the authority to rearrange ABC's schedule pushing back *Dancing with the Stars* to make room for the new show.[336]

Marvel Comics has become an accepted part of the American culture. Its integration into film now almost guarantees that it will no longer have to concern itself with the opinions of cultural watchdogs. However, Marvel will always be concerned with public apathy. The comic book market continues to shrink, and it is questionable how much longer Marvel will be able to sustain its production of comic books. Comic books presently are a niche market. Unlike the craze of the 1950s and 1960s when they were a part of the youth culture, comic books are less popular than they have ever been. This is ironic considering the "superhero" genre has become a mainstay of summer blockbusters. Like other print media, such as newspapers, the future of the printed comic book is doubt. This may be part of the natural progression of media seeking out new

[334] Dave Itzkoff, "Disney Gives Details for Superheroes," *New York Times*, October 16, 2012, C 3.
[335] Fritz, 1.
[336] Lisa de Morales, "ABC Shrinks 'Dancing with Stars' for Marvel Comics Drama," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2013.

ways to adapt their content to a cynical American public increasingly accepting of violence and sexual content in their media. For example, five of the most popular basic cable shows in 2013 (*The Walking Dead*, *American Horror Story*, *Vikings*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Breaking Bad*) were also some of the most graphically violent shows yet on basic cable, thus setting a new precedent for sensational violence and sexuality in American media.[337] New independent series developed by Netflix, Starz, and Amazon such as *Black Sails*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *Da Vinci's Demons*, all have strong sexual content, display full frontal nudity of both males and females, and graphically explore homosexual relationships. The modern media landscape has altered significantly and mainstream comic books continue to model a more modest approach.

The new content in comic books has raised no ire among the public because Marvel has been careful to restrain content so that it blends in among other American media and perhaps even seems "safe" in comparison. Currently, it appears comic books may be too "safe." The changes in media that started in the late 1970s have continued to slowly alter the American perception of acceptable content in media. As a result, comic books have fallen behind the curve and are now only read by devoted fans, while those who have a passing interest in comics prefer to get more graphic stimulation at the movie theater. While the media in the 1970-1993 became more respectful in presenting homosexuality and race, it has also become far more violent and sexualized often at the expense of women. This escalation of sensationalism has been traumatic for comic books which were once viewed as subversive media considered dangerous by the public. The

[337] Lisa Moraes, "TBS Snaps USA's Yearly Streak with Demo Viewers, but 'Walking Dead' is King of the Cable Universe in 2013," December 14, 2013. Available at http://www.deadline.com/2013/12/tbs-snaps-usas-yearly-streak-with-demo-viewers-but-walking-dead-is-king-of-the-cable-universe-in-13/

media altered so drastically that comic books seem quaint in comparison. Sadly, from the standpoint of viability in the modern media landscape filled driven by a bloodthirsty audience, comic books do not go far enough to keep the masses entertained.

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